

"The Password"
Sermon for Holy Thursday
Lectionary Year A
March 20, 2008
Text: John 13:1-17, 31b-35
Dr. David T. Howeth

When I was a kid, I was periodically a part of a neighborhood club. We would gather together for meetings at our tree house, fort, or some other secret site, and each member of the group would have to identify himself to gain entrance. This rite of passage was usually accomplished by the use of a secret handshake, a sign, or the wonderful verbal expression known as the password. You are familiar with passwords. You may have to use one to gain access to your personal computer, either at work or at home. But I would like for us to consider the password as it was used by our neighborhood club, that is to say, the one word that readily would identify a person as a true member of the group. If you knew the password, you could get into the meeting place. With it, you were part of the crowd. More than any other word, the password was the key to your identity.

You may not have thought about it recently, but we, as Christians have a password. We have one word that should be the key to our identity as followers of Jesus Christ. We are to be known by that one word, and that word appears in our Gospel lesson for this evening. Jesus tells his disciples gathered together for the Last Supper with him, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, . . ." But before we talk

about what our password as Christians *is*, let's look at what it *is not*.

The password is not doctrine. Jesus did not say that everyone would know us as his disciples by what we believe, as much as I might wish he had. Obviously we must believe, and hopefully what we believe is consistent with what we find proclaimed in scripture and what has been held to be orthodox in church tradition. As United Methodists, we have doctrinal standards, to be sure, but we don't require prospective members of our church to pledge their allegiance to the tenets of a particular doctrinal statement before joining, because we know that strict adherence to a creed or an affirmation of faith is not proof of discipleship.

The more I read the *Gospels*, the more I come to the conclusion that *Jesus must have been less concerned with what people believed than he was about how they lived*. For example, many times Christ would not allow the demons he cast out of people to identify who he really was. These demons had their doctrine correct, but you wouldn't exactly call them disciples. Jesus seems to want as his disciples people who walk the walk even more than talk the talk, those people who follow his way and not merely articulate the right systems of belief.

I find it interesting that a lot of Christians refer to themselves as "believers." *We are* believers, certainly, but hopefully that is not all we are. If doctrine becomes our password, there is a great danger of our becoming theoretical Christians and practical atheists. Why? Because *what we believe only matters as it affects how we live*. Being a Christian is not mental assent; it is relational action. In other words, if our

beliefs do not manifest themselves in our lifestyle, our attitudes, and especially our treatment of others, then our beliefs don't mean very much. Many of today's Christians are dead certain of what they believe, but the world sees little evidence of it in the way they relate to other people—at home, at work, and at play.

Not only did Jesus not command that we would be known as his disciples by our doctrine, Christ also did not say we would be recognized as his followers by our religious experience. **Experience is not the password.** Experience is a necessary part of being a Christian. All of us hopefully have had several personal experiences in which we have felt the presence of God in an intimate and intense manner. My salvation experience, in which I first asked the Lord to come into my life, was such an experience. There have been many other "mountaintop" experiences in my life since then, such as my Walk to Emmaus, but the fact that I have had these experiences also does not prove that I am a follower of Christ.

There are churches that tend to focus on the importance of having a particular faith experience, and the emphasis in these cases is usually on a certain prescribed set of emotions, feelings. Being a Christian is presented primarily in terms of the emotional experience a person is expected to have. But there are a couple of problems with the groups within the church that tend to stress the importance of a particular experience. *The first problem is that everyone is expected to have the same type of experience.* One and only one faith experience becomes the standard of comparison, and if you have not been blessed enough to have that exact same kind of experience, you must not be the same kind of

Christian, not as good a Christian, as those who have had that normative faith experience.

The second problem with an emphasis on experience is the tendency to dwell on the experience itself and never move beyond it. Our spiritual lives must be seen as a journey in which we mature past our initial faith experience to discover a whole series of experiences, moving us closer and closer to the discovery of who God is and who we are in relation to him. The Bible is full of stories of people's tremendous experiences with the awesome reality of God. Picture Moses at the burning bush, Isaiah in the temple, the women at the empty tomb, and Paul on the Damascus Road. In every case, it's the change in the person's life following the experience that means more than the experience itself. Experience is not the password.

Not only is the password not doctrine or experience, but **the password is not law**. Being a Christian is not rules-keeping. God is not Santa Claus, "making a list and checking it twice, finding out who is naughty or nice." Following Christ is not living under a set of rules; it is living under the sovereignty of his rule. Recall, if you will, the rich young ruler who came to Jesus to find out what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. He had followed all the rules. He could do that. What he couldn't do was to follow Jesus. And the priest and the levite who passed on the other side of the road from the man who had been robbed and beaten by outlaws and went out of their way to avoid helping him did so because they were following the rules. The Good Samaritan came to the victim's assistance because he wasn't as concerned about the law as the

more religious people had been who ignored the man in need.

Some of the most "religious" people I have known, religious in terms of keeping rules and regulations, are not the kind of people I want to spend a lot of time around. Sometimes they are not very warm, compassionate, open, sympathetic, inclusive, affirming, and encouraging. Often they are rigid, unbending, judgmental, condescending, and condemning. But Jesus wasn't that way at all. In fact, he himself was condemned by the religious leaders of his day for not keeping rules and regulations and for associating with the wrong kind of people. It appears to me that if we are to be like Jesus, we are going to need to make something other than legalism the password that identifies us as disciples.

We have seen that the password is not doctrine, experience, or law. What is it, then? You know what it is. It's love. **The password is love.** Christ said that everyone will know us as his disciples if we love one another. But how are we to love? What kind of love are we to show toward one another? Is it to be self-serving love? Is it to be love based on specific performance? Is it to love with strings attached, with conditional love? No. Jesus makes it clear what kind of love it is to be. "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

Jesus said we are to love in a special way, a unique way, a new way. *We are to love as he loved.* And his kind of love is different. It is self-abnegating love, suffering servant love, unconditional love. It's the kind of love that ties a towel around its waist, fills a basin with water, and performs the disgusting task of washing feet caked with the filth of

unpaved streets. It's the submissive kind of love that comes in the shape of a cross.

Ken Medema, a Christian composer and performer with an incredible insight into the gospel, has a song entitled "What's Going On in Antioch?" The story of the song is told from the viewpoint of a non-Christian observing the behavior of the early church members in Antioch. He speaks of their strange customs, how they sell all they own, live together, and share equally. He states that

they follow that man that was killed on a cross like a criminal a few years ago. They claim that he rose from the dead and is coming back someday for them. They get together in small groups and read some of the things he said. They have a strange celebration with bread and wine. They say it represents his body and blood. It sounds very superstitious to me.

But after stating all of that, Medema has the non-Christian telling the story say that

yet there is something about them, something I cannot understand. They love with a kind of love I've never seen before, not in all the land. This is the kind of love that if gone unchecked, could turn the world upside down. There is something about them.

Apparently, there *was* something about them. This kind of love *did* turn the world upside down. It still can today. Is there that same something about us, that something by which everyone will know we are

true disciples of Christ? The early Christians followed the new commandment of Jesus. They loved one another as he had loved them. They seemed to know that love is the password, the key to being a follower of Jesus and the key to all relationships. And so I ask: Do we know this password?