

PILGRIM CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
2310 East Fourth Street
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May 1, 1983

"A New Commandment I Give to You"
John 13: 31-35

Elizabeth Oettinger

My text this morning comes from the 13th chapter of John: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, you also must love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples: if you have love for one another."

In the past few weeks, through the events surrounding my father's death, I have learned much about the love of God, and how that love can be expressed through human persons. If I could preach any sermon this morning, I would preach about my father, and the ways that the love of God was made manifest in his life. But that is still too close; I can't do that yet. Instead I would like to share with you something of the story of three very different people who have stood by me and my family through this recent crisis. People who found very different but important ways of loving us as we confronted my father's dying.

My father spent his last days in a hospital called The City of Hope. It is a hospital which specializes in cancer treatment, and though in some ways it is like any other hospital, in other ways it is unique. There are few rules, and those are often broken. For example, there are visiting hours and a limitation on the number of visitors a patient may have. At my father's request, those rules were suspended. He could have all the visitors he wanted and they could be present at any time of the day or night.

One of his visitors was a young man named Benji. Benji was one of my father's patients. He met my father when he was thirteen and had attained the dubious distinction of having been kicked out of no less than ten private schools in his brief career. The last school advised Benji's parents to commit their son to a good caretaking institution and forget him. In their desperation, they flew to California to consult with just one more doctor who, they had heard, worked with children like Benji. Benji says my father saved his life. Though that is not entirely true, under my father's care Benji managed to graduate from high school and Columbia University. He is now a Hollywood script writer.

I confess that Benji is not one of my favorite people. He has become very "Hollywood." He calls everyone "darling", worries about whether women think young men with salt and pepper hair are sexy, and knows only two adjectives: "fabulous" and "tacky". Benji thinks sick people are tacky. He told me a year ago that people with colds should stay home because blotchy faces and stuffy noses are so "totally tacky." I was suffering from a cold when he told me this. But for all his affectations, Benji loved my father. And despite his distaste and downright squeamishness about physical illness, he came every day to the hospital to see my father. You could see it all played out on his face. He didn't like being there. And he didn't really know what to do or what to say. He was afraid. But because of his love, he disciplined himself and he was there. Sometimes Benji's presence became wearisome for us. But we respected him for the gift of presence that he brought; we respected him because in the battle of love and discomfort, love won out. And somehow his being there gave the rest of us the courage to talk about our own fears, our own discomfort. It is all right to be afraid in the face of death. It is all right to feel helpless and awkward, to not know what to do or what to say. It is all right to want not to be there. I think we are so often afraid to express our love for friends or family who are sick or grieving because we feel we must do a perfect job of it. Benji did a lousy job of it. But he loved my father, and us, and so he was there, and we were glad to have him for the love was more important than the awkwardness. "A new commandment I give to you," said Jesus to his disci-

ples, "that you love one another." Benji's love was expressed through the gift of presence.

There was another person who came to see my father, though not as frequently as Benji. Her name is Edith. She is a charismatic Episcopalian; she practices the laying on of hands and faith healing. I am not a charismatic. I am skeptical of faith healers. The first time I heard that Edith was coming to pray with us I looked desperately for an excuse to be somewhere else. But she is my mother's friend, and so I stayed to be polite. She came right into the room and began talking to my father who was then unconscious. She did not talk to him in ways that would require a response, only told him that she was there and that she loved him. Somewhere her talking became a prayer as she spoke to him of the journey of death and her conviction about the better, freer life my father was entering into. Edith, like my father, has cancer and has been pronounced untreatable. She will say that my father and she became friends as they began to contemplate death together as an adventure that both of them were traveling toward. Theirs was not a friendship of chitchat or sharing their life stories. Edith does not chat. She comes in, prays, and gets out to some other place where she is needed and goes through the same abrupt routine again. She and my father shared their doubts, their hopes, their certainties--their faith--in prayer. That was the way she related to the rest of us as well. You know, that woman prays better than anyone I have ever met. She does not look for impressive phrases or proper ecclesiastical language. She is not embarrassed to pause and think mid-prayer. She shares her faith like she breathes, and the result is beautiful, sincere and convincing. I can not tell you why, but every time she came to us keeping the vigil at my father's bedside, we felt refreshed able to endure yet a little longer. She left, in her wake, a very real sense in us of the presence of the Holy Spirit, even in that difficult and painful place. She had no great, new theological insights for us, but she left us feeling that we were held very closely in God's love. "A new commandment I give to you," said Jesus, "that you love one another." Edith's love was expressed through the gift of prayer, the gift of unselfconsciously sharing her faith.

There is one other person I would pick out of those who have surrounded us these past weeks and that is a woman named Clara. Clara has helped my mother and father clean their house for over thirty years now. One of my earliest memories as a child is of following her around, hold her cloths and polishes, learning to dust and to iron. Clara has become part of our extended family, and though she is officially retired, she still works at my parents' home one day a week or whenever else they need her. She was one of the first people we called when my father died. When she got the call, she arrived on our doorstep minutes later, unasked, ready to clean the house and make it ready for visitors. We were all pretty well immobilized at that point; we appreciated her efforts in our behalf. But the best thing by far that she did had nothing to do with cleaning. My mother began to cry and everyone there started hovering around her trying to comfort her. Clara came through the room, went over to my mother, took off her glasses and said to her, "Now you just take off those glasses and let it all out. Cry you eyes out. It's good for you." Then she told the rest of us leave my mother alone and let her cry. She was so matter of fact about it. Of course my mother needed to cry, as did we all, and what Clara did was to give us permission to do just that. So often, I think, when we are confronted with grief we try to "fix" it, to cheer up the one who is grieving. It is an arrogant thing to do, when you think about it, to think that we can "cheer up" someone whose husband or father, or friend has just died. Clara did not try to cheer us up. She just let us cry. At one point she cried with us and she didn't make a big deal about it. "A new commandment I give you," said the Lord, "that you love one another. Clara allowed us, by her loving, to be the people we had to be, a family grieving for one whom we loved.

If there is any question that I have been asked as a minister, it is the question

of "how do I respond, how do I express my caring for those going through a personal crisis." And I know that I at least fall into the trap of feeling that I must think of the "right" thing to do or do nothing at all. Too often that leads me, and I think others, to do nothing. I know that for myself, in the past two weeks, I have felt the love of friends, and through them, the love of God, in countless ways; in food prepared and phone calls made, in cards and letters, and those who came to pray with us or to cry with us or just to be with us. So many of those gifts were imperfectly given, with rough spots and awkward places, just as all that we do or say is imperfect. And all the gifts given do not take away the grief. But along with the grief there is in me a wondrous sense of a web, a safety net of caring, of love given and love received. Hear these words from the gospel of John: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, you also must love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples; if you have love for one another." Amen.