In the name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My text for this morning’s sermon is our Lord’s rule of love. We read of it in this morning’s Gospel Lesson from John Chapter 13. Jesus lived by love for the thirty-three years of his life here on earth, and in the night in which he was betrayed he commended his rule of love to his disciples. The passage goes this way:

> 34 I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. 35 By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. (John 13:34-35, NRSV)

Year after year, for a quarter of a century now, my catechism classes with the children of our congregation have consisted of two parts: Luther’s Small Catechism and a series of Bible stories in both the Old Testament and the New Testament—Bible stories that I feel every Christian ought to know. I give the children a quiz on the Bible stories. Each week when they come to class they know they have to face a quiz on the assigned Bible story.

This week’s Bible story was about Samson. He was a judge in Israel for twenty years and he was a mighty man of physical strength. We read about him in Judges Chapters 13 through 16. For these current two years of catechism, I have only one catechism student, Katarina, and she is a good one. When she was done with her quiz this past Tuesday, she drew a fun picture on her quiz sheet of Samson with his arms around the pillars of the building—the building that Samson pulled down upon himself and upon the enemies of Israel. That was the final, glorious deed of Samson trying to serve the Israelites.

When we were discussing the story of Samson, I asked Katarina to think of Jesus when she thinks of Samson. I know that is an odd combination, Samson and Jesus, but I think there is some important truth to be found in comparing and contrasting these two heroes. This morning’s gospel story about Jesus’s rule of love gives me a way to compare and contrast Samson of old and our Savior Jesus Christ.

Let me begin with some ways in which Samson and Jesus are similar. First off, both Samson and Jesus are fighting against enemies—not so much enemies against themselves, but even more fundamentally, enemies against their people. In the case of Samson, the enemies are the Philistines. The
Philistines are the enemies and the oppressors of Samson’s people. In the case of Jesus, the enemies are much greater. They are the enemies of all humanity: sin, death, and the devil. Let us make no mistake about this: sin, death, and the devil all mean to hurt us, to diminish us. All three of them. They mean us nothing good, no matter how alluring they might seem at the time. To be a human being in this fallen world means that we have to contend with enemies. And these enemies would have destroyed us in the end if they had not first been conquered by Jesus. Samson defeated a good number of Philistines. Jesus defeated the grim enemies of humanity.

The second way in which Samson and Jesus are alike is that their great victories over the enemies meant their death—the death of Samson and Jesus. Samson died when he wrapped his mighty arms around the pillars of the banquet building and caused that building to crush him and thousands of the Philistines. Jesus likewise died when he suffered a terrible death on the cross—a death that he did not deserve, but a death that spared you and me from eternal death. Samson and Jesus were both brave people. They were willing to suffer in their own bodies if thereby they could help their people.

So those are two remarkable ways in which Samson and Jesus are alike: they contend with the enemies of their people and they are willing to die in the process.

But the interesting thing is not so much the ways in which Samson and Jesus are alike, but rather the ways in which they are different. Samson was a violent man of quick-temper. He worked fierce revenge on anybody who offended him. Also he could be manipulated. If someone nagged him enough he could be led to depart from what would have been a wise path. Jesus is neither of these things: he is not a violent, quick-tempered man ready for revenge, nor is he one who could be tricked. His opponents often tried to lure him into missteps or into saying the wrong thing, but Jesus was too wise and too good for that. And so Samson and Jesus differ in their temperaments and in their wisdom.

But the chief difference between the two had to do with the nature of their strength. Jesus probably had the ordinary strength of a young man who had a career behind him working in a carpenter’s shop. He was probably quite strong, but strong in an ordinary measure. Samson on the other hand had immense physical strength. The Bible tells the story of how a lion came rushing at Samson and the man simply tore the lion apart. He did not run, he did not flinch, he simply killed the lion.

The strength of Jesus, on the other hand, was not so much a physical strength but rather the strength of God and the strength of love. Both of these strengths are available to us, but it is especially the strength of love of which I wish to speak in this sermon. You and I do not have the strength of God in the same way that Jesus does. You and I cannot simply say to a storm on the sea, “Peace, be still,” and make it so. Jesus is the Second Person of the Holy Trinity.
He is fully man but also fully God, and in his nature as God, he, from time to time, exercised absolute sovereignty. He commanded wind and wave, for example, and they leapt to obedience. He took casks of water and turned them into casks of fine wine. He took a few loaves of bread and a few fishes and multiplied them to feed a crowd of 5000 people. You and I cannot do such things. We do have access to the strength of God by way of our prayers, and on the last day we might well find that it was our prayers that did mighty deeds, even upheld nations and people we love. But our access to the strength of God is by way of prayer, not by way of our command. In that sense we are different from Jesus.

But the other kind of strength Jesus had—the strength of love—is a kind of strength that you and I can have too. In fact, in this morning’s gospel story Jesus commands us to exercise this kind of strength. And so we have his rule of love:

34 I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. 35 By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. (John 13:34-35, NRSV)

Now, we all have some experience of the strength of love. The saying about a mother bear and her cubs gets at that. Love can fortify a person with great strength. Amazing deeds of strength can be accomplished in a crisis, all because love is at work. Cars can be shoved aside, people can be carried, wonderful things can be done through the strength of love.

Also awesome is the strength of calm, daily love—the kind of love that can discipline a mother and father to pour out their strength and to resist all kinds of temptations and luxuries for the sake of their families. Years can flow by—good, noble years—all carried along by the strength of love.

But the thing about our Lord’s rule of love in this morning’s Gospel Lesson is that it expands the field of love. Jesus is not encouraging his disciples simply to love their families. Rather he is asking them to love “one another” as he has loved them. And that can be a challenge. That can be something that does not come naturally to us.

The first interpretation of the phrase “love one another” is that Jesus is talking about the church. Christians are to love one another as Jesus has loved us, and that is a mighty love. But the church is a hospital for sinners. The church is a hospital for sinners who are trying to get better. Until they do get better, the church or any local congregation can have people in it who are rather frustrating, even annoying. And our Lord’s rule of love asks that we love those frustrating brothers and sisters in the Lord as he has loved us. According to this rule of love, there should be no one in the church we are
unwilling to listen to, to talk to, to be reconciled to. Rather, we are to lend our hand to one another and try to help one another along.

So that is a first interpretation of the phrase “love one another.” According to this first interpretation, people outside the church should be impressed by the love they can see within the church. Jesus puts it this way:

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. (John 13:35, NRSV)

Onlookers might be impressed by Samson pulling down the pillars of some great building. But onlookers might value even more the notion of a community in which people are really good to one another, even if they are frustrating to one another in various ways. This willingness to love one another as Jesus has loved us is important for our witness to the world.

But I believe it is in the spirit of Jesus that we should expand the field of love even beyond the church. Indeed, as that golden verse puts it, “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son...” The world! God loves not only the church but also the world. Indeed, I think it would be correct to say that God loves the church for the sake of the world. His marching orders to the church reflect that love for the world:

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit... (Matthew 28:19, RSV)

Adding it all up, our Lord’s rule of love means that there should be afoot in the world a group of people who are especially concerned for love. They practice love in their families, in their churches, and in the city. They strive to be people of love, they practice it even when their heart is not in it, they grow in love, so that people who know them can say about them, “They seem to be getting sweeter the older they get!”

Last week we noted that Easter means not only the resurrection of Jesus but also the raising up of good people like Tabitha of old. Now we learn this too: that Easter means a whole new flood of love on earth. Why not? Love is our Lord’s rule of life, and it is the manner of life that he approves of. Indeed love is the manner of life that will survive and will stretch on into eternity, through the grace and merits of Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory with the father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen