

Anyone who has used a typewriter, before switching to a personal computer, may remember that the sound and feel of the computer keyboard at first seemed strange. Pushing a computer key gives neither the satisfying clack nor the same physical sensation of tapping a typewriter key. Still, even on a computer, there's a slight sound, and you can feel the keys move beneath your fingers. But what about on your smartphone? Its "keyboard" is essentially a smooth sheet of glass.

By themselves, the keys on the screen -- if we can even call them "keys" -- give our fingers no tactile response at all. Phone designers must have figured that out, and realized, that most users want some sensation when they touch a screen button -- something to tell them that they actually did something. So, the designers added a feature called "haptic feedback," which basically means that if you tap a button, your phone will vibrate slightly, assuring you that you have, in fact, activated whatever a button does. *That tiny vibration is haptics at work.* Without it, you'd just have to trust that when you've touched your screen where a specific icon is displayed, you have actually initiated some type of action.

If you want to investigate this a bit, or test out my theory, go into the "notification" settings on your smartphone. Somewhere in there, you'll find a place where you can turn down, or turn off, the haptic feedback, which is usually on by default. Then, try pressing the keys on your screen without it. If you do this you will notice they still work, but you won't receive or feel any palpable response.

With haptics in mind, think about our Gospel this morning from John where, in his "farewell discourse," Jesus tells his disciples, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. ... By this *everyone will know* that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another!!" The phrase "everyone will know" suggests that the love for which Jesus is calling is a kind of haptic feedback -- something substantial that lets not only the recipients of a loving action know,

but also those who witness it know, that they are in the presence of a follower of Jesus.

In addition, this love is also to be a kind of haptic feedback for the disciples themselves after Jesus is no longer physically present among them. Previously, when Jesus talked about love, he was talking about a "love-your-neighbor" kind of love. That love extended *outward* from the circle of believers to whoever was in need (as the Good Samaritan parable illustrated). Here, however, Jesus is commanding the disciples to love *one another*.

In other words, he's telling them that when they act in loving ways toward each other in the faith community they belong to, they will reflect his love for them. And, remember that earlier in the evening, before Jesus launched this discourse, he had washed the disciples' feet to illustrate graphically for them that loving someone means that they should serve one another. In effect, Jesus was creating a group, later to be known as *the church*, whose primary identifying characteristic is that they love each other, even expressing that in service to one another.

Beyond that, the group can be widely diverse in ethnicity, gender, language, nationality, age, political persuasion and most of the other things that we use to label, or identify, people today. But the disciples' love for one another is the essential identifying mark. As John explained it elsewhere, "Those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also." As Jesus himself said, "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." Love says a lot about a community like the church. It marks those who express such love as followers of Jesus. And it says that they know God. Love is the mark. Love is the haptic feedback.

So how does this play out with us who are disciples today? Is the presence of Jesus recognizable in the ways in which we love one another within our faith

community? Unfortunately, there are plenty of tales of church life that illustrate the opposite, starting with silly accounts about church members who behave badly when visitors sit in "their" pew. One pastor tells a typical story of an aging adult Sunday school class with a shrinking membership that was asked to move to a smaller room. A growing young-adult class needed the larger space more urgently. The aging group refused; it was *their* room!

There are also anecdotes about newcomers not returning to a congregation because they didn't feel welcome, narratives about women's groups who put locks on the kitchen cabinets so other groups would not use the kitchen and mess it up. And I haven't even mentioned anything about church fights, domineering and toxic members, malicious gossip, and the branding of some fellow attendees as not "real" Christians because of their personal opinions on certain social or ethical issues.

No mark of love in all of this. No haptic love at work here. Actually, I take that back, perhaps there is a slight bit of haptic at work. Ever tap in your pass code for your smartphone or iPad, and tap in the *wrong* code? The keypad or screen buzzes and jiggles frantically. Wrong! Wrong! Try again! Well, that's what it feels like when the church behaves as I just described! There should be some sort of haptic buzz, jiggle, or vibration that alerts all of us to how wrong -- on so many levels -- behavior like that is! Especially from people who claim to belong to the church of Jesus Christ! Seriously?

But, let's not discount the good work the church is already doing. Let's remember that congregations often manage to put up with, work around, or calm disruptive members -- things that most businesses won't tolerate. This shows that we've learned *something* about loving one another, even loving some of our fellow worshipers who are harder to love than others.

Let's also not forget that --- Many children get their first real understanding that they might have something to offer to the world when we praise them for some role they have in the Christmas program, or a solo they sing during worship. - Some teenagers hear their calling to be disciples of Jesus through the example of a youth leader while attending a church retreat on a congregational scholarship, or because of the acceptance they found at church when some things weren't going so well at home. - The funeral dinners; visits to the shut-ins from laypeople; prayers for one another during times of illness or grief or concern; strong friendships between some members who wouldn't even have met if they hadn't come to church -- all this, and more, is what we might call "haptic" (certainly "Christian") love.

Some followers of Jesus help people by babysitting when the regular babysitter doesn't show up. Or, they fill in for a caregiver so he or she can have some downtime. There are a lot of things that congregations, even struggling congregations, get right. Often, followers of Jesus really do express their love for one another through service and support. Jesus said it was "a new commandment," indicating that it's not optional for Christians. But he could have also referred to it as *haptic*, the kind of feedback that tells us we've actually done something to show the presence of Christ, and that we are involved in some form of discipleship.

In practice, of course, while we may be able to serve each other without hesitation, we aren't likely to be able to have the same level of fellowship with *everyone*. Years ago, the great Quaker writer Thomas Kelly said, "No single person can hold *all* dedicated souls within his [or her] compass in steadfast Fellowship with equal vividness." (He considered Fellowship so important that he wrote it with a capital "F"!) Kelly went on to acknowledge that there are *degrees* of Fellowship. Although all might be within the bonds of love, some are nearer to us individually than others. Some of these, who are not so near us, might be nearer to others, however, making various groupings in the church overlap.

"The total effect in a living church," said Kelly, "[is] sufficient intersection of the bonds to form a supporting, carrying network of love for the whole of [humankind]. Where the Fellowship is lacking, the church ... is lacking and the kingdom of God has not yet come. For these bonds of divine love and 'carrying' are the stuff of the kingdom of God. [Those who are] in the Fellowship [are] in the kingdom of God." As Christians, we are called to love all people -- even our enemies -- in the name of Jesus Christ. And yet there is a special love and relationship we have for our spouses, children, and other family members. In a similar way, there is to be a special love we are to have towards our brothers and sisters in the faith. We are to be a family to one another.

There's room, of course, to talk about how our loving acts toward people outside of our church walls are a haptic to them as well -- and note that Kelly spoke of the Fellowship as a "carrying network of love for *the whole of [humankind]*." Thus, our loving one another is something that tells those outside the church that God's love for them, as expressed through us, is real! But that's another sermon, for another day.

For today, however, it's enough to remind ourselves that Jesus commanded us to love one another. Let's be glad for the ways we already do that, and for the happy results that follow. Let's take up the places where we fail to be as loving to one another as we ought to. Let's figure out how we can do better. And let us thank God for the love we have for one another in this caring and compassionate congregation. Amen.