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**Fruitful congregations ‘Love’ (vv. 12-14)**

***Fruitful Congregations develop their life as a community of God’s people***

**Love**

It seems a very strange thing to command someone to love, but that’s what Jesus does in verse 12. ‘My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you’. Maybe it has to be that way because loving others is not something for which we naturally have a heart and increasingly community is something of a lost art.

Perhaps we assume that if we ‘go to church’ with a group of people for long enough we will somehow get to love each other, but we shouldn’t take that for granted. In fact today, as we retreat more and more from community with one another back behind our ever higher garden hedges, into spending ever increasing hours behind closed doors in front of a screen, perhaps the greatest loss is knowing that we are loved by others and knowing how to love others.

**Service**

Recapturing loving community in our congregational life requires commitment to one another. Jesus pictures that sort of commitment as a ‘laying down of our lives’ (v.14). It is to serve others rather than to expect to be served ourselves. In many congregations an attitude has grown up that suggests members think the church and others in it – ministers, leaders, an increasingly smaller band of willing workers – are there to service their every need and want. In fact, we are to serve one another, put others needs before our own, work at discovering the particular gift we bring to our congregation’s life and use it for the good of the whole. As we start to see the fruit of this in our church life, we will also find its influence spilling over into how we approach the community around us in witness. They too get that the life that we share together is marked by love for one another and for them. That becomes a powerful draw.

**Friendship**

Love, community and service cannot happen at a distance. They require a closeness of relationship that Jesus describes as ‘friendship’ (vv. 13&14). Again, friendship is something of a dying art in our ever busier, more privatised, world. We need to come out of ourselves and let others come into our lives if we are to share a life of love together as Jesus intends in our congregation.

Congregational life has not been left untouched by recent changes in the way we live. Unless we find realistic ways of developing space and place to build community, the love that is meant to be an incredible resource for our life together and a mark of the difference Jesus makes to the world, will continue to recede. So, fruitful congregations are always asking and addressing the question of how they develop their life as a community of God’s people.

*Who do you know best in your congregation? How have you formed the relationship that you have? What can we learn from that?*

*What places and spaces, in which love, service and friendship were expressed and experienced, used to exist in your congregation’s life, but no longer seem to work in the way they did?*

*In what places and spaces might members of your community get the chance to see and experience your love for one another and for them in your congregation’s life and witness?*

*What makes us feel awkward about ‘coming out of ourselves and letting others come into our lives’ so as to share the life of love together that Jesus intends?*