

Love is the lesson

John 13:31-35
The Fifth Sunday of Easter
Sermon preached April 24, 2016
St. James' Church, Madison Avenue, New York, NY

Jesus said, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another."



I hope it's safe to admit it here, but I am a serious Easter geek. I love Easter *music* so much that I have a playlist of choral music and hymns that I listen to throughout the season. One of my favorite anthems for Easter is a setting of an Edmund Spenser poem from the 16th century. Several composers have put it to music, and I especially love the setting by William Harris. But as much as I love the music, it is the poem itself that gladdens my heart. It opens

Most glorious Lord of life, that on this day,
Didst make thy triumph over death and sin:
And having harrow'd hell, didst bring away
Captivity thence captive, us to win:

It's a poem that celebrates an aspect of Easter that Anglicans sometimes don't attend to, the idea that Jesus Christ descended into hell and liberated the captives there. This reminds us that Easter isn't just an amazing miracle of a dead person being raised to new life — though that is astounding — but that in the Resurrection God taunts Satan and evil itself. Because if Jesus can redeem the captives in hell, he can certainly redeem whatever I have done and whatever you have done.

And that's not all that I enjoy about this poem. I especially savor its seemingly gentle ending:

And for thy sake, that all like dear didst buy,
With love may one another entertain.
So let us love, dear love, like as we ought,
Love is the lesson which the Lord us taught.

"Love is the lesson which the Lord us taught" does seem, at first, to be gentle, perhaps even sweet. But there is very little that is sweet or gentle about the love that Jesus taught.

Jesus said, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another."

If we aren't careful, we can hear this as Jesus inviting us to be really *nice* to one another. Love one another. What does that mean, exactly? Should we domesticate Christ's love

the way we often reduce Jesus himself to a nice teacher or the bearer of warm, fuzzy feelings?

No, “love one another” is meant as a challenge, an exhortation.

The first clue that we are meant to be challenged by this is the fact that Jesus gives us a *commandment*. It is not a suggestion, or a parable, or a request, but a commandment. In case we Episcopalians are tempted to think that “commandments” are things that belong to *other* religious people, this our wake-up call. We have commandments too, and this one is, for sure, easier said than done.

“Love one another.” That doesn’t sound so bad, right? But then there’s the next pesky bit: “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” Just as I have loved you, Jesus says. To quote the renowned theologian Scooby Doo, “Ruh Roh.” When we ponder the sheer depth of love that Jesus requires of us, we realize Scooby has it just right. Ruh roh, indeed.

How did Jesus love us? Well, for starters, he offered his very life for us. He gave everything. Now, it is possible, and I pray true, that none of us will be called literally to lay down our lives for another. But that’s not the whole of Jesus’ radical, amazing love for us.

He loved everyone. Sinners. Tax collectors. Outsiders. The very poor. The scandalously rich. Children. Women. The sick, the desperate. Notorious sinners. Everyone. And he loved them in a way that offered the power of God’s transforming presence. He brought Good News. He offered healing. He tenderly washed the feet of his friends. He challenged people to be changed, to repent, to start over. He always spoke the truth.

If we are going to love others as Jesus loved us, we’re going to have some work to do. This goes way beyond “nice” to encompass the kind of love that will push us right out of our comfort zone. In fact, I dare say that if it seems easy to practice Christian love, we’re not doing it right.

Jesus’ love doesn’t make sense. It is costly. It is extravagant. It is offered freely, without expecting anything in return. In other words, loving as Christ loved is its own reward. It earns us nothing to do it, while it costs everything. That’s a completely counter-cultural notion in our might-makes-right be-your-own-person seize-your-destiny world.

What does Christ’s love look like in our day?

Last year, after the awful hate-fueled shooting at Emmanuel AME church in Charleston, SC, the judge invited victims’ family members to speak at the bond hearing for the accused murderer. Ethel Lance was one of those killed, and her daughter spoke in the courtroom, directly to the shooter. Less than two days after losing her mother to gun violence and racism and hatred, she said this to her mother’s killer:

I forgive you. You took something very precious away from me. I will never get to talk to her ever again—but I forgive you, and have mercy on your soul ... You hurt me. You hurt a lot of people. If God forgives you, I forgive you.

I don't know if I would have the strength or the faith to be so quick to forgive, but I do know with every fiber of my being that this strength can only come from God. If you want to know what Christ's love looks like in our day, there it is. It is a daughter announcing forgiveness to her mother's killer.

Receiving love like this from another person is a priceless gift. We can't repay the gift, which is why it is so extraordinary, so life-changing. Seeing this kind of love lived out in others is inspiring, transforming.

Imagine if we Christians got this right more often, not just here in church, but in our whole lives. What if we were so imbued by Christ's love and the power of Easter faith, that we became fearless advocates for those without a public voice? What if we voluntarily gave away our material wealth for the good of the world? What if we said that we simply will not tolerate a world which takes non-stop violence for granted? What if we rejected all attempts to peddle fear and to magnify greed? What if we announced forgiveness in a world which demands score keeping? What if we were so grateful for the love of Jesus Christ in our world that we couldn't help ourselves but show it forth in our lives?

Jesus said, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

One of the best preachers in Christian history, John Chrysostom, said about 1600 years ago,

Miracles do not attract unbelievers as much as the way you live your life. And nothing brings about a proper life as much as love.

If we are living our lives as followers of Jesus, those around us will know it. They will see that our values are different. They will see that our priorities are different. They will see that we care for one another in ways that are senseless, extravagant, and grace-filled.

Love one another. Jesus repeats it three times. He commands us: love one another. He says that we are to follow his example: love one another. He says that our lives should show that we are disciples as we love one another.

Loving this way seems impossible, and it is, if we try to do it ourselves. The Good News here is that God will help us. And, we have other Christians, companions on the journey, with whom we can stumble along together, lifting each other up when we fall and sharing joy when we get it right. We have the sacred meal for which we are gathered today, this meal in which we remember Jesus Christ broken and poured out for us. And

as we receive him in Holy Communion, Christ's love is poured into our hearts. This love, not ours, is what we share with others.

How will you love one another? How will you do this today? How will you change your life, even a little, to share God's gracious gift of love? How will you be, for all those around, a witness of hope in a world of fear? How will you love one another?

So let us love, dear love, like as we ought,
Love is the lesson which the Lord us taught.

Amen.