

St. John's Episcopal Church
Jackson, Wyoming
Sermon for April 24, 2016 ~ Easter 5C
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How do you tell a disciple of Jesus Christ? Jesus himself answers the question in a few words: "And now I give you a new commandment; love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. If you have love for one another, *then everyone will know that you are my disciples.*"

Love is the hallmark of Christianity. It is the I.D. of discipleship; the true identification by which one who is in union with Christ is recognized in the world. Jesus commanded his disciples to love!

But what kind of love is it that has to be commanded? Surely not the type celebrated in romantic songs, novels, and movies. That kind is commended, but not commanded. No, it's a tougher, less attractive strain more in the category of justice, compassion, and acceptance. It is the kind of love Jesus has for us. In the words of H.H. Farmer, "The Christian doctrine of love is not a glib and easy doctrine. There is at the heart of it the cross." The cross is the ultimate payment in the high cost of loving. This is the unlimited love Jesus has for us and we are commanded to show that kind of love for one another. If we do *not*, we will not be recognized as his follower. If we do, it will be the one sure sign of the truth of our claim to discipleship.

How does the love you show for others measure up when compared to Christ's love for you? Sometimes we look pretty good. Sometimes we know the love is there and showing forth nicely. But other times we slip and the tragedy is that when we do we are prone to do that which Christ would never do; we try to justify our unloving actions and secure our position of power by saying, "Well, I love you, *but...*" And that's the way so-called holy wars get started. That's the way relationships are shattered. That's the way communities of faith become little more than civic clubs.

When Jesus told his disciples, "You must be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect," he was referring to this radical command to love one another. We usually think of perfection in terms of the Latin sense of the word meaning "completed without error." But in the New Testament, it is the Greek sense of the word that is used, meaning "maturity." So, if our love is not perfect, as perfect as the Love of Jesus for us, then we still have some maturing to do. And, in order for us to grow toward maturity, we have to be constantly reminded of how the love of God was expressed in Christ Jesus. This is why we are summoned to gather week by week for the Apostles' teaching and the breaking of the bread. This Sacrament is the reminder, the promise, and the real experience of Love Divine. When we as a community join around the Lord's Table, we receive his love. The formula is simple; the more we receive his love, the more loving we become.

The commandment to love one another is a theme that is cited numerous times throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. And Jesus had certainly repeated those words often during his ministry leading up to the event recorded in today's passage from John's Gospel. What, then, was the special nuance that made this final mandate so special and so memorable?

I believe it was that qualifying phrase that Jesus added to the words, "Love one another." He made it very specific by saying that his followers were to love one another "as I have loved you." In other words, the unique way that Jesus had incarnated that ancient ideal was to become the pattern of how his followers then and now were to love one another.

St. Augustine of Hippo provided two clues to such a question. His first clue is his observation that Jesus loved each one he had ever met as if there were none other in the entire world to love. Such radically individualized affection will always remain a mystery. But let us never forget that we're made in the image of that extraordinary love. Doing what Jesus did in loving each one he ever met as if there were only one to love is an ideal toward which we can reach even if it always should remain utterly beyond our complete grasp.

The second clue St. Augustine offers is that Jesus loved all as he loved each. The way he loved was not only individualized, but it was also incredibly universal. The eyes of the Jesus described in the gospels were never filled with contempt or disdain. Even when his words sounded harsh, it was because of his deeply loving concern for those whom he addressed. St. Augustine's words are a wonderful description of the unique way that Jesus loved. He now invites us to love in that way as well. He loved each one he ever met as if there were none other to love, and he loved all as he loved each.

In reflecting upon this passage, the late John Claypool recalled something C.S. Lewis had to say about the concept of love. Fr. Claypool said that Lewis, in one of his last books, examined all the famous Greek words for the concept of love and then concluded that they come down to one seminal distinction: the difference between what he calls "need love" and "gift love."

Need love, Lewis says, is always born of emptiness. A need lover sees in every beloved object or person a value that he or she covets to possess. It does not take exceptional imagination, Lewis contends, to acknowledge that many times when we humans say to another, "I love you," what we really mean is, "I need you. I want you. You have a value that I very much desire to make my own, no matter what the consequence to you may be."

Now over against this graphic image, says Fr. Claypool, Lewis contends there is another reality that is utterly different. It is what he calls "gift love." Instead of being born of emptiness or scarcity, this form of loving is born of fullness and abundance. The goal of gift love is to enrich and enhance the beloved rather than to extract value.

Lewis concludes this contrast by saying that the uniqueness of the biblical vision of reality is that God's love is gift love, not need love. And then he says, "We humans are made in the image of such everlasting and unconditional love." Gift love, as Lewis describes it, is the foundation stone of how St. Augustine describes Jesus' way of loving. You and I are loved by God in this way. This way of loving forms our spiritual identity when it is the way we choose to live our lives.

I know. It's a very tall order. It seems out of our reach. But I am reminded that theologian Karl Barth once said, "Jesus is the name of our species, in relation to whom we are still subhuman but, nonetheless, called ultimately to become." I do not believe Jesus would have given us this new commandment if it had been impossible for us to obey.

So, this is the good news, the promise, and the hope we embrace: You and I, with the help of God's unfailing grace, can grow into the wonder of loving each one as if there is none other to love and loving all as we love each. Then, everyone will know that we are the followers of Jesus, the Risen Christ.