

Reflection: May 22, 2022

Revelation 21:1-6, John 13:31-35

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

It sounds so easy, does it not? And surely, of all people, we Christians ought to be able to love. It’s a defining mark of who we are. It is fundamental to the faith we proclaim and commanded by Jesus, whom we follow. So why is it so hard to practice that radical and inclusive love by which Jesus says people will recognize us as his followers?

What is it about love that is so difficult? Maybe the answer is found by contrasting when and where love seems easy. Love is easy when I love people who think like me, look like me, live like me, and love me, too. Love in abstract is very appealing. Love is easy when I read about it; romantic love and movie love seem special and charming. Everybody loves a good love story, right? When we look at love through these lenses, it looks downright doable and delightful.

But, as you all know, human nature can be considerably messy, and even the most self-aware and selfless among us can find love to be tough in practice.

As we think about the call to love, perhaps we should ask ourselves a few questions:

First of all, do we take seriously that love is at the center of our faith? I suspect most of us can recite the popular verse: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten

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Son...” And we know the passage made famous in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians: “Love is patient and kind; not envious or boastful, arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way Faith, hope, and love abide; and the greatest of these is love.”

Secondly, even if we know and believe that love is at the heart of things, why do we sometimes find it so hard to love? Or, to put it a bit differently, who do we have the hardest time loving? Is it people who are different from us? People who have hurt us? People who fail to see things our way? Who?

Thirdly, when we do love others well, what is that like? And, just as much, when we feel loved by someone – accepted for who we are, valued, honored, even cherished – what is that like? How does it change our lives? And how does being loved help us share our love with others more fully?

That question draws us back to today’s Gospel. Over the past number of weeks, as we continue our journey through the season of Easter, we’ve been working largely with stories of the resurrection and Christ’s appearances to his disciples. But today we go back to a story which is set just before the cross and the resurrection.

In John’s account, it’s Thursday evening, what we call Maundy Thursday ... the day before Good Friday. The name “Maundy” is derived from the Latin *mandatum*, meaning a mandate or command, and comes precisely from this passage: “I give you a new commandment, that you

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love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”

Judas has left the Last Supper in order to carry out his betrayal; Jesus’ death by crucifixion is imminent; and Jesus knows that his disciples are about to face the greatest devastation of their lives. If you knew you were about to die, what would you tell the people you love? What last, urgent piece of advice would you offer?

As Jesus faces such a moment, he gets right to the point. With just one commandment, summarizing Jesus’ deepest desire for his followers: “Love one another ... as I have loved you ...”

And then, right on the heels of the commandment, a promise. Or maybe a warning: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

A preacher by the name of Debie Thomas, reflecting on this statement, says we should notice what Jesus *doesn't* say. He doesn't say, “Believe the right things.” He doesn't say, “Worship like this or attend a church like that.” He doesn't even say, “Read your Bible,” or “Pray every day,” or “Preach the Gospel to every living creature.” He says, “Love one another.” All of Christianity distilled down to its essence, so that maybe we'll pause long enough to hear it. *Love one another.*

And yet, it seems we perpetually fail to obey Jesus’ dying wish. But it's not just a *command* to love ... because can

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love really be commanded? Those of you who have children or grandchildren probably understand full well that commanding them to love each other never works. The most we can do is insist that they *behave as if* they love each other: “Share your toys.” “Say sorry.” “Don't hit.” “Use kind words.” But these actions — often performed with gritted teeth and rolling eyes — aren't the same as what Jesus is talking about.

Jesus doesn't say, “*Act as if* you love.” He says, “*LOVE* as I have loved you.” Because loving one another happens best when it is a response to the love we have received, the love we know — in our case, as people of the Christian faith, the love of God, the love of Jesus, made real in our own lives.

There is a story about a man who had a huge boulder in his front yard. He grew tired of this big, unattractive stone in the centre of his lawn, so he decided to turn it into an object of art. He went to work on it with hammer and chisel, and chipped away at the huge boulder until the ugly stone became a beautiful running deer. When he finished, it was gorgeous, breath-taking.

A neighbour asked, “How did you ever carve such a marvellous likeness of a deer?”

The man answered, “I just chipped away everything that didn't look like a deer!”

Perhaps we need to ask ourselves if we have anything in our lives right now that doesn't look like love. And if so, with the help of God, we need to chip it away!

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If we have in our lives things that don't look like compassion, mercy or empathy, then we need to chip them away!

If we have hatred or prejudice or vengeance or envy in our hearts, then for Jesus' sake, and for the other person's sake, as well as for our own sake, we need to get rid of it!

We must never forget that love is the Christian's primary witness to the world. Have you had people say to you, "I'm impressed with the way you love other people. You must be a Christian." Do people see the love of Jesus shining through you?

G.K. Chesterton once wrote that "The Christian ideal (*that of loving one another*) has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried."

Imagine what would happen to us, to the Church, to the world, if we took this commandment of Jesus most seriously? What might Christendom look like if we truly worked at cultivating "impossible" love? What kind of new earth would there be, if we embodied, in all we think and say and do, the love of the God who dwells with us and within us?

Most of you, like me, know fairly well how to *do* things. We know how to provide non-perishable items for the Food Bank, and how to fill shoe boxes for children around the world. We know how to bring dessert for the Community Kitchen or a casserole to a bereaved family. We readily make donations to our favorite charities. But do we know how to love as Jesus loved? To feel a depth of compassion that's

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gut-punching? To empathize until our heart breaks? To experience a hunger for justice so fierce, so urgent, that we are prepared to rearrange our lives in order to pursue it?

Or do we want to play it safe? Keep our circle small and manageable? Do we draw lines and say 'That's how far I'm prepared to go to extend kindness to someone else'? Do we choose the people we love based on our own affinities and preferences — not on Jesus' all-inclusive commandment? Charitable actions are easy. But cultivating our hearts to love as Jesus loved, becoming vulnerable in authentic ways to the world's pain, is hard and costly.

And yet this was Jesus' dying wish. Which means that we have a God who first and foremost wants every one of his children to feel loved. Not shamed. Not punished. Not chastised. Not judged. Not isolated. But *loved*.

But that's not all. Jesus follows his commandment with a promise that is both exhilarating and terrifying: "*By this everyone will know.*" Meaning, love is the litmus test of Christian witness. Our love for each other is how the world will know who we are and whose we are. Our love for each other is how the world will see, touch, hear, and find the hope and promise that is ours in Jesus. It's through our love that we will embody Jesus, make Jesus relatable and plausible, to a hurting and increasingly secular world.

Such is the responsibility we shoulder, whether we want to or not.

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But here's our saving grace: Jesus doesn't leave us alone and bereft. We are not direction-less in the wilderness. He gives us a road map, a clear and beautiful way forward: "*As I have loved you.*" Follow my example, he says. Do what I do. Love as I love. Live as you have seen me live.

Weep with those who weep. Laugh with those who laugh. Touch the untouchables. Feed the hungry. Welcome the child. Release the captive. Forgive the sinner. Confront the oppressor. Comfort the oppressed. Wash each other's feet. Hold each other close. Tell each other the truth. Guide each other home.

Because we are a people whose God makes his home with us – providing sustenance, wiping tears, inspiring action – we can experience what it is to abide in that holy space where all love originates. We can make our home in Jesus' love — the most abundant and inexhaustible love in existence. Our love is not our own; it is God's, and God our Source, is without limit, without end.

Christ has no hands, but our hands; no feet, but our feet. We are his ambassadors, representing him to the world. And when we love as he has loved us, it will make the difference. People will notice. Life will be made new – the former things will pass away. Hearts will be transformed - because we have loved as Jesus loves.

Thanks be to God!