

6 Easter                      John 15:9-17  
Christ and Grace          May 6, 2018  
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“Love one another as I have loved you.”

Jesus gives this simple phrase to remember, as he prepares his disciples for his departure. But love is not always easy, is it? If it were so easy, then why would the scriptures have to keep reminding us, commanding us, to love? And Jesus, in today’s gospel, is doing just that – commanding us to love. The words command and commandment appear *five* times in this passage.

While the other gospels call Christians to love neighbors and even enemies, the Gospel according to John calls Christians to love one another. John’s Christians needed to hear about love. Some time after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, we know that the early Christians, who considered themselves Jewish Christians, were “put out of the synagogue” or were excommunicated because the Jewish leaders considered them to be heretics for following Jesus. To follow Jesus cost them the central core of their lives - their participation in the Temple rituals. To follow Jesus was to lay down that which was as dear as life itself – their Temple worship. What it cost them was their community and their identity. Not only that, but they were persecuted and threatened with the possibility of martyrdom for their new beliefs. In writing his gospel, the author of John’s Gospel intended to show them how to create a new community, a new family, by loving one another as Jesus commanded.

It seems strange that Jesus would command his disciples, and us, to love one another. Perhaps because Jesus knew that we will try to get out of it every chance we get – because it’s not easy. I am sure that all of us can think of some people in our lives, perhaps in our own family, who are just impossible to love. Never mind those in our community, or in politics, or in the world. We could probably all make a list of people who annoy us, people who are rude or selfish, people who are relentlessly demanding, people who perpetually disappoint us. And when we think of those people (those people!), we sometimes don’t *feel* very loving toward them. (This is often one of those occasions when Southerners will use that phrase, “Bless her heart!”)

And this is where Jesus changes the definition of love. Love is not an abstract concept but an action. Love is less a feeling and more a conscious decision to act for the good of another. And love is *not* something we can do by ourselves. We can love only with God’s help. We love because God first loved us. We love because God abides in us and we in God.

By abiding in Jesus and allowing Jesus to abide in us, God strengthens us for love. Martin Luther King, Jr. said it clearly, “At this level we love [others] not because we like them, nor because their ways appeal to us, nor even because they possess some divine spark; we love every [person] because *God* loves [them].”

In the Greek language there are a number of words to express love that go far deeper than the ubiquitous “love” that we use in English. We use the same word whether we are loving our new car, the weather, chocolate ice cream, or the person we are married to. We toss the word around

liberally about lots of things and people, but do we mean it? Do we show it? Do we love as Jesus loves?

After Jesus commands us to love, he defines love in its greatest form – to lay down one’s life for one’s friends, which is exactly what Jesus did, and who of us is ready to do that?

Jesus is our example for how we are to love. Throughout the history of Christianity, there are those who have been called to be martyrs and to suffer for love. We are all called to lay down that which is dear to us at some point in our lives. That may mean different things for each one of us. For the earliest Jewish Christians it meant laying down their Temple and Jewish community. By abiding in Jesus, they were given the strength to love, the strength to endure through all of life’s challenges as they formed a new community. All of us here have been given a faith community where we can be loved and accepted as we learn to practice this hard business of laying down our lives for others.

We practice this love in our homes where we learn to lay down our lives for our parents, children, siblings, and spouses. We learn to love as God loves when we lay down our own desires for the welfare of another, treating one another with grace and kindness rather than criticism and judgment. Then as our love expands, we practice this love as we learn to lay down our lives for our faith community; visiting the sick and homebound, taking flowers and food to our shut ins. We do this as we volunteer to teach our children, mentor our youth, serve on altar guild, sing in the choir, or any of the things we do that make church happen. Sometimes we are called to lay down our comfortable ways of being church to risk trying something different that will bring about new life. This love then expands beyond these walls to reach those who are lonely, hungry, abused or impoverished. I think we can agree that Petersburg is filled with opportunities for us to practice this love. We will be empowered to do things we did not believe we could do, when we allow God to love through us, to abide in us.

I have had the amazing experience of abiding in God’s love over the past 2 weeks. My unexpected surgery meant that I had to allow God to lead me through a valley. I had to abide in God’s love and trust that others would lay down their lives for me. And what I experienced was so amazing – the care I received in the ER and in the hospital, from healthcare professionals who had never met me, went far beyond anything that was required in their job descriptions. And the outpouring of love from all of you through cards, flowers, gifts, and most importantly your prayers, brought me healing and joy. My joy was made complete! What an experience of God’s abiding love!

Near the end of this gospel reading, Jesus appoints his friends (and we are his friends) to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last. This is the *tangible sign* of God’s love - an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. That, by the way, is the definition of a sacrament. The inward and spiritual grace is God abiding in us, loving us so that we can love others. The outward and visible sign is our decision to lay down our lives, our own desires, for the good of another. We have been commanded to love one another, to create communities of love. What does it look like to love one another in *your* life? What might laying down our lives look like for the future of Christ and Grace?

Amen.