

St. Paul's, Concord
Easter 6, Year B, May 5 & 6, 2018
John 15:9-17
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You may have noticed that, although we're in the season of Easter, our gospel readings have been transporting us back and forth like a first century time machine! Today's account from John's gospel takes us back to Maundy Thursday, to the Last Supper, and Jesus' command for his disciples to love one another.

Earlier on that occasion, Jesus had demonstrated *his* love for his friends in an extraordinary way, when he knelt and washed their feet. I'll come back to that later, but for now it's enough to take note of this: when Jesus commands us to love each other, he's not telling us to do something he's unwilling to do himself. More than that, he's not demanding something we're incapable of. It may be difficult; it may be something we'd rather *not* do; but it's neither impossible nor unreasonable.

And it *is* a command. That's how important it is. Jesus doesn't say, "Wouldn't it be nice if we loved one another?" or suggest we might like to think about loving one another. He gives us a direct order, a clear mandate.

As we were reminded last week in John's first letter to the early church, "God is love." (1 John 4:8) We are defined by our belovedness, and God is defined by love. Love is why God made us; love is the purpose behind God's creation of the entire universe. And God made *us* capable of love too — capable of both receiving it and giving it. Love is part of our divine DNA — and Jesus is telling us that we have a responsibility to put that love to good use.

But why would Jesus restrict his command to the disciples gathered in the upper room? Does he really want his friends to only love other Christians? Aren't we supposed to love everybody? Well yes: Jesus also teaches us to love neighbors and even enemies — but, in this instance, Jesus is reminding us that, apart from loving God first and foremost, loving other members of our faith community is where we begin. If we can't love our fellow parishioners, chances are we'll struggle to love people who are outside the church — and that would seriously limit our capacity for ministry and mission. Which means it would also limit our potential for establishing the Kingdom of God in the world.

There's also the matter of setting an example. If Christians don't love one another, what message does that convey to the world? There's a good illustration of what I'm talking about in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, where he reprimands the Christian community for having disputes amongst themselves. They were even taking each other to court in front of non-Christians. It's not hard to imagine how damaging that would have been to the early church. These were the people who were supposed to be full of love, who were supposed to exemplify harmony and peace, and look what they were doing! You can almost hear the reactions of the observers: "Join *that* mess? I don't think so!"

Think about modern day congregations — and the damage that can be done when there's public hostility and conflict. As Bishop Rob points out regularly, our society expects faith communities to be different from the rest of the world: to be havens of goodness and concord. People of faith who don't meet those expectations are often branded hypocrites.

I know that I'm talking about something that isn't really an issue at St. Paul's. Increasingly our parish is recognized as welcoming, friendly, and accepting. But that doesn't mean we're perfect – far from it! Every one of us can admit to some all-too-human reactions to one another. We each have our likes and dislikes when it comes to the people with whom we share our space and our life. So we may be thinking there's no point even in *Jesus* telling us to love one another. Either we do or we don't. The connection's either there or it isn't. End of story.

Last week I shared the story of my brief and ill-fated second-grade romance, as an example of the impossibility of forcing somebody to love you. And I pointed out that the converse can be equally challenging. After the service, a member of the congregation said to me, "Love your neighbor. It's so simple. But it can be so *hard!*"

Maybe we need to think again about what Jesus means when he commands us to love one another. I don't believe it's about feeling a rush of emotion every time we think about each other; it's more about how we *treat* each other. Do we respect one another? Are we aware of other people's needs? Are we willing to listen to them, to pray for them, and to give them our kindness and our support?

In our gospel passage, Jesus talks about the ultimate expression of love: the sacrificing of one's life for one's friends. As we're well aware, this was no idle talk — Jesus *did* die for us: for you, for me and for everyone else in the world. That means that, if there are people we find it difficult to like, Jesus still thought those people were worth dying for. If Jesus could do that for them, is it really too much to ask us for us to be kinder and more attentive to them?

Jesus goes on to offer another revelation: "I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father."^(John 15:15) It's hard to grasp just how vitally significant those words are. Jesus, Son of God, is calling us his friends. And he's giving us the inside story on everything he's learned from God the Father – although there's really no deep secret about it. What Jesus learned from his Father, and shares with us, is that love is central to life.

When Jesus washed his disciples' feet at the Last Supper, it was a powerful demonstration of how he regards his followers as friends, not servants. Jesus comes to us *as* a friend who wants to do things for us, not to be waited on by us. And he expects us to do the same for each other.

But what if this really is just too hard? What do you do if you *don't* love your fellow Christians? What if there are people you simply don't want to spend time with, people you don't enjoy helping and supporting? Well, that complicates things a little but we can deal with it if we really want to.

In his book, "Mere Christianity," C.S. Lewis wrote this: "Do not waste time bothering whether you 'love' your neighbor; act as if you did. As soon as we do this we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him."

If we find it hard to obey Jesus' command to love one another, we can start with practicalities. We can talk to someone we haven't yet gotten to know; we can offer to help someone who's struggling; we can listen to an opinion we don't share, and make a point of being kind. By the grace of God, those behaviors become genuine expressions of love. And, bit by bit, we make our faith community stronger and our ministry more effective.

This past Tuesday, several of us joined a group of over 100 people at a prayer vigil at the Federal Building in Manchester. This was an eclectic gathering that included members of 20 or more different faith communities. Many of us didn't know each other – and we represented a wide variety of backgrounds and beliefs. But it was clear that every one of us was motivated by that fundamental teaching, “Love one another.” It was evident in our respect and care for each other, and it was especially obvious in our united support of immigrants who shared their stories and those who entered the ICE offices not knowing if they'd be separated from their loved ones or allowed to stay in the only home they know.

In a little while Georgia is going to talk about General Convention, a gathering of several thousand Episcopalians and Anglicans from all over the USA and the world. A group like that is even more diverse than the ecumenical or even interfaith gatherings we're used to, because there is such a huge range of cultures represented. But yet again we'll be coming together with our shared ethos of loving one another – and that will enable us break down barriers and accomplish the work that is so necessary in this troubled world.

Time and time again we see how learning to love one another here in the safe and supportive environment of this parish equips us to love one another in the world beyond St. Paul's. Love your neighbor. It really is so simple – and the more we do it, the easier it becomes.