

## Sermon April 28<sup>th</sup> – “What Love Can Do”

In our text this morning, the lectionary takes us back to a passage familiar to us during Holy Week, usually read on Maundy Thursday. This passage in John’s account of the gospel happens during the last supper that Jesus has with his disciples. It is important for us to place this text in its overall narrative context, for without it we simply have a sweet little verse about how Jesus wants us to love one another. On the face of it, we see Jesus telling his dear disciples that this is his new commandment, that they love one another. How nice. They must all get along already, they have been friends and companions through this long disciple journey, some even before that. Loving one another is easy. Jesus must just be telling them, love each other, not just like each other. Simple right? Not so much really.

Consider what has just happened in John’s account. Jesus and all of the disciples have gathered for their supper before the festival of the Passover in Jerusalem. When they have all gotten there, John tells us that Jesus already knowing that his death is imminent, takes off his outer cloak during the meal and washes the feet of those gathered around him. John emphasizes that Jesus does this through the protestations of Peter and others, but also with the full knowledge that Judas will betray him. As they share the bread together around the table, Jesus speaks to the evil in Judas that it is time for him to do as he is going to do. And Judas leaves.

All of this happens before the verses that we have read today on love. Sandwiched on the other side is when Jesus informs Peter that he will deny him three times before the morning comes. It is at this moment of high drama and tension, where all the disciples are wondering among themselves which one of them the betrayer is going to be, it is at this point that Jesus offers these words. “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.”

Which, at this point, tells us a great deal about what kind of love Jesus is talking about here. This is surely not a romantic love, neither is it simply being nice or loving those who will love you back. This is a pure, radical love Jesus is talking about. Think about it. Jesus has just washed the feet of his betrayer and the one who will deny him. He has shared a sacred meal with them. And most of all, he is going to leave this upper room with these friends and be killed, for his love of them. He is going to demonstrate to them how great a love that God has for those of the world, even for those who do not love him back. This radical love is hard. It is hard because it is self-sacrificing. It means putting the good of the other in front first, even if it hurts.

Writer, blogger and dean at Luther Seminary David Lose says this about the new commandment that Jesus gives. He says, “I find it striking that these are the words Jesus’ leaves with his disciples. I mean, he could have said, ‘Go out and die with me.’ Or, ‘keep the faith.’ Or, ‘when I am gone go out and teach and preach to all the world.’ Or, well, any number of things. But instead he offered this simple and challenging word, ‘love another.’” It is striking isn’t it? No caveats to this word either. Not a “love one another when...”, “love one another only”, or “love one another if...” to be found. Just simply, “love another.”

Why are these words given to the disciples and to us? Lose continues his reflection, saying that these words are important “Because this kind of love is the hallmark not just of God and Jesus but also of the Christian church. As in the old camp song, Jesus agrees that the whole world will know we are

Christians not by our sermons or our sacraments or our festivals or our buildings or our crucifixes or our family values ... but by our love. It's just that important."

This love that we and the disciples are called to is not a passive love. Jesus says to his disciples that night, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." It is through our love that people will know who we are and who we claim as our God. The love we are called to is an active one. A love that is transformative, one that will cause disturbances to the norm.

It still might seem like a simple thing for us to do, loving one another, but simplicity doesn't always indicate an easiness in accomplishment. We as human beings yearn to be loved. We yearn to love others. To be in relationship with one another. Loving is something that we desire. But this true kind of love, the hard love, loving beyond self is a challenge. Offering up love when we don't expect any in return can be frustrating. We love, but we want to be loved back. When we don't receive it, we take it away and put it toward someone else who might return the favor.

We do this as individuals, and as the institution of the church. Peter is confronted with this issue in the Acts reading this morning. His visions of clean and unclean foods lead to his dining with gentiles. He is reprimanded for eating with those who are "unclean", who are not Jewish, who are outside of the circle. In response, Peter recalls the words of Jesus about being baptized in fire, and who is he to deny gifts of the Spirit which God has given to the gentiles? But in relation to the John text, it is easy to substitute into Peter's recollection the new commandment that was given at that last supper with Jesus. Peter might have said, "Christ told us that we would be known by our love. And just as Jesus loved me when I denied him three times, so must I love these Gentiles. They have shown love to me, a Jew, by inviting me to their house for a meal. We have been commanded to love one another, no

matter what. And it is because of that love, that the Spirit has descended on this place and we are able to praise and worship God together.”

Peter’s fulfillment of the commandment to love one another, along with the rest of the disciples, changed the face of the Church as we know it. In their love for each other they were able to spread the gospel message throughout the world, to different people, different religions, different races, men and women were able to observe and receive that love they offered through Christ.

Where do we see that love now? Where is that simple, self-sacrificing love that we are supposed to have? I don’t want to sound too pessimistic, but it sometimes feels like a mere glimmer of what it is supposed to be. As a Church, church with a capital C, we have become so consumed with self-preservation, worrying about where we are headed in the future, lamenting the long ago past of perceived prosperity. The Church want’s its insiders back. How do we fill those pews again? Where are the folks that used to be here but no longer show up? We struggle with dwindling numbers in congregations, the pain of closing doors and selling buildings. Pastors and leaders fight about ways to keep our pensions and health benefits. Denominations fight against denominations, vying for those people to keep them afloat. They wonder year after year, what changes in polity or rules will push us over the edge into irrelevancy. The church strains over every little decision, wondering “will this be the thing that saves us or destroys us?” All of these questions, thoughts, worries, fears and hopes float around in the Church Universal. But the one question I have rarely heard asked is, “are we loving each other as we have been commanded to do?” They will know we are Christians by our love, the song says. We won’t be known by our large endowments, by our high steeples, or by how full our pews are on Sunday mornings. We will be known by our love. The love we show to others.

What will happen to this thing we call Church when we love? How will that transform who we are? I don't know, just like the disciples had no idea where this love they shared would lead to. When we are willing to sacrifice all that we have, like God in Christ did for us, for love, what will Church turn into? This is what makes loving another so hard. We don't know what the outcome will be. There might be hurt, there might be death. What currently exists might no longer be. And we hate to lose what we have worked so hard for, what people before us have worked so hard for, in their love for each other. But before buildings, before institutions, before ourselves, we are to love another.

This message of love that Jesus gave to the disciples was immediately important for them. Love was how they were going to stay together, as disciples, even when Jesus was gone. The love that he showed to them would carry them on. Jesus said that the glorification of God has been fulfilled in himself. That glorification has happened then, it is currently happening now, and will continue to happen in the future. The glory of the Lord is the same. And we are invited to be a part of that glory. Do we want to be a part of that glorification? It's simple, all we have to do is love another.

Love can do amazing things. It can be transformative, life giving. Love is what marks us as Disciples of Christ, it is how we show to the world that we belong to something else, something unique. This love is hard, it is self-sacrificing. But how wonderful to live in a world where there is love for the other, over all the rest.