

Sermon for Sunday, April 24, 2016
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
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Today is the fifth Sunday of Easter,
the fifth Sunday
where we focus our eyes and our hearts
on the resurrection
of our Savior
and what that means
for our lives.

I always get a bit frustrated
that we don't get to read the resurrection appearances
these Sundays after Easter.
A couple of Sundays
and then we're back in the gospel of John,
back before he died,
and I sometimes wonder
how this is all connected.

But when you think about it,
all of the gospels
were written after Easter,
all the gospels
were written after Jesus died and rose again.
And of all the stories they could have included about Jesus,
the gospel writers could only write about a limited number,
so they chose the ones
that would help us believe
and show us how to live
as followers of Jesus,
and do what he
commanded.

Because we've inherited
the disciple's calling,
we carry their commission,
to bring Christ's kingdom
come

on earth as it is in heaven.

And so it is that today
we go back
to the night before he died,
a low-lit room, the disciples gathered around a table
to break bread, to drink wine.

They're caught between two images,
the hands of their teacher, their Lord,
washing their dirt-encrusted feet,
and handing a piece of bread
to his betrayer,
and into that moment
Jesus speaks:

"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."

That commandment
was to define them
from that time forward,
that commandment
was to be the determining
quality of the Christian life,
that commandment
was Jesus's prescription
to change the world.

It sounds so simple,
but somehow
in practice, it's a lot more complicated.

"I give you a new commandment
that you love one another.
Just as I have loved you,
you also should love one another."

The first thing most of us think of
if we talk about love
is being-in-love, that first flush of romance

when the whole world seems to join with us
in celebration,
and nothing
else seems to matter.

It's the most wonderful state — but it's usually all too short.
And then it fades, into a kind of taken-for-granted-ness,
maybe even mixed with a bit of disappointment
and it takes all our energy and willpower
to continue to love, and to grow together, so that our love is renewed
in a deeper
richer
less exciting but more fulfilling kind of way.

But you know, I'm not convinced that
that
is exactly the love Jesus was talking about.
After all, that kind of love
is all around us. There's nothing particularly Christian about it. Even some of my atheist
friends
have a deep and rich relationship
which I suspect many Christians couples would envy. And being Christian
doesn't protect you
from the failure of that love.
Misunderstanding, grief, error, betrayal, death.
All of them
get in the way of love.

And then there's family love.
The love that somehow comes from nowhere
when we are born, that makes our parents
be willing to do anything for us
even through dirty diapers
and uncontrollable crying
and sleepless nights.
And makes us wobble towards them
as soon as we can walk
and seek safety in their arms
when we are hurt or afraid.
As we grow older
it becomes more difficult.

I still remember the struggle I had as a teenager,
still loving my parents,
but needing to learn how to be myself,
to make my own decisions,
to set my path,
to be other than just my parent's
child.

And then we grow older still, and the love
can, if we're lucky,
turn to friendship,
but later
becomes painful
as we face their aging
and their death.

And love between grandparents
and grandchildren,
sisters
and brothers,
all kinds of love
which finds expression
in our families.

And yet
And yet, I'm not even convinced that
that
is what Jesus is talking about.

The fact that's he's talking to his disciples,
the ones who were closest to him those three years
of his traveling ministry,
perhaps that suggests
that what Jesus means
is the love they have for one another as friends, love
that is shaped by sharing everything together, love that is deepened
by praying alongside and for
one another.

But even that
seems to be nothing special. I know plenty of people
who might not use love-language,

but who have a deep bond between them:
 Tuesday mornings at the BLT,
 or evenings at a book club,
 or meeting at the gym.
 Why should people know we are Christians
 just because we love our friends?
 Pretty much everyone
 does that.

So maybe we have to look even further back, back beyond the night before he died, to some of what Jesus taught about love. And I can think of one place in particular where he points to a distinctive love, something that might set us apart, love that is fragrant, that might draw other people to Christ.

It's the parable of the good Samaritan.
 One day, Jesus is asked what is the greatest commandment.
 "Love God," he says,
 "and love your neighbor
 as yourself."
 And when he's asked,
 "Who is my neighbor?"
 he tells the story
 of the good Samaritan.
 Which as far as I can work out, suggests that my neighbor
 is anyone
 I run across
 in the course
 of my daily
 life.
 Except that is a whole lot different today
 than it was for Jesus. When you're traveling mostly by foot,
 when communication is limited
 to passed on messages or perhaps a rare letter,
 the pool of possible neighbors
 is pretty small.
 But when you live in a world of TV, telephone, the Internet,
 the pool of neighbors
 is expanded
 to include
 the whole world. People speak of the phenomenon

of compassion burnout. There are so many needs;
the whole world is my neighbor. How can we I love all these people?
And so, too often, we respond
by narrowing our circle of love
until it is small enough
for us to handle, small enough
to keep a hold on.
Love becomes confined
to the domestic,
a phone call here,
a casserole there,
some unused furniture
donated
to a local charity - all of them good things to do,
but too often
costing us little, and having relatively little impact
on our world.
but loving our neighbors
is not just about
the personal and the domestic
but about the public
and the political.
Lobbying our governments
to provide for the weak among us,
working to address the causes
of poverty,
seeing that all our children
have a fair chance
at a decent education.

That's one place
where we can show Christ's
distinctive
kind of love.

And another
is here in the church.
If there's one place
where Jesus' words, "love one another as I have loved you,"
should have some impact,

it's here among us followers, Christians -
we've even taken on his name.

But loving
is as much a struggle
here
as it is anywhere else.

It's by our love for one another, Jesus said, that
people will know
that we are followers of Christ.

But love is not always
the public face
we show the world.

How many times
have you heard someone say
"The church is full of hypocrites.
You people talk about loving one another,
but you're not very good at it."

And if we're honest
we have to admit the truth
of their accusations.

One of the things the church -
and Christians -
struggle with the most
is how we deal
with our differences.

Some of those differences are relatively small or private.
Who should be allowed to take on particular roles in the liturgy?
What standards of behavior and dress do we expect in church?
What should the priorities be
for our priest,
and for all of us in the parish?

Others are much more public.

How do we treat people who are different from us, whether it's because of their gender,
or sexuality, or race?

Who has the right to make decisions?

How much
should we as Christians
get involved politically?

And underlying those issues,

how do we read and interpret Scripture,
and what are the real essentials
of our faith?

We struggle with one another and with our differences,
we struggle with how to love.

There are no easy answers.

And that was as true in the early church
as it is now.

Our first reading today
was from the book of Acts,
which tells the story of the very beginnings of the Christian church
the years immediately after
Jesus died and was raised.

We look back at that period
as a kind of golden age –
the apostles were still around, many people
had witnessed the resurrected Jesus
and it had all the excitement
of any new movement.

And yet
there were problems.
And one of them was that perennial question,
who is in
and who is out.

Christianity
began
within the Jewish community.

Those early Christians
still went to prayers at the local synagogue,
they still kept the laws
and the traditions
that had been part of their lives
for generations.

But as the good news of the gospel
began to spread
outsiders
wanted to join in.
they had heard about this Jesus,
now they wanted to be part of this community

called by his name.
But they brought with them
their own traditions
and their own values.
They didn't circumcise their babies;
they didn't keep
the food laws.
And so the early Christians found themselves
divided,
struggling with the question
of what was the core
of this newly established faith,
who could be in,
and who should be out, struggling with
how to love.
Should the newcomers
be required to buy into the whole Jewish
tradition,
as well as the new Christian one,
or was God doing something new
here.
It's a question that comes up
time after time
in the New Testament.
There are no
easy
answers.

This time round, in the story from Acts
it took a vision
to convince them,
a vision, and the evidence of their own eyes, of God at work
among the outsiders.
They were called to experience
and to express
the love of God
which had broken down the barriers
which used to divide them,
to see God at work
even in the most unexpected places

and the most unexpected people
and to welcome them
in to the community
of faith
and love.

The call
to love one another
invites us to look
where God is at work,
in the faithful witness
of our brothers and sisters in Africa and Asia,
in Colorado and Newark, South Carolina and in San Francisco,
in Brooklyn and Queens,
Garden City and Port Jefferson,
to love one another
even as we struggle
with our differences.

And the call too,
is to love one another
as Christ loved us,
and to remember that he spoke those words, sitting at the table
with Matthew and Andrew and Philip,
and Peter who would deny him,
and Nathanael and James and John,
and the other Judas and the other James and Bartholomew,
and Thomas who would doubt him...
And we join them, followers of Christ,
with all our differences and all our struggles.

“I give you a new commandment
that you love one another.
Just as I have loved you,
you also should love one another.”