

5th Sunday of Easter
Year C - 19/5/2019

Acts 11:1-18
Psalm 148
Revelation 21:1-6
John 13:31-35

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

It would not be possible, I think, to preach through the Easter season without a strong focus on, or at least a background undercurrent of **love**. After all, we understand the whole paschal mystery through the lens of God's love for creation and all of the created order, including humankind.

But as we consider in particular the Gospel passage today there is a risk for us, to fall into the trap of idealizing this sense of love, and making it more about emotion, feelings, the human way in which we often think about love, and risk missing the depth of what Jesus says today.

Jesus' command to love one another must be taken in context. Read without its literary framework around it, it might become another biblical platitude quoted by those who think it's easy (but interestingly who rarely practice it themselves). It ends up on posters with the backdrop being some sort of idyllic scene of an ocean, or snow-capped mountains, a rushing waterfall, or birds flying across a bright blue sky. It actually seems doable.

But, of course Jesus' command in John, which we receive as our passage this morning, follows the explicit presence of evil in the gathering and the departure of Judas to betray Jesus. This is exactly when we need to be reminded to choose love -- when evil seems to be having its way. When those we thought were close, we thought we could trust, abandon us. When the actions and words of others clearly come from hate and suspicion and prejudice. In that situation, Jesus says, choose love.

The context, I think, tells us a great deal about the kind of love Jesus is talking about. This surely isn't romantic love, nor is it simply being nice, nor is it only loving those who love you back. Think about it: when Jesus washed his disciples' feet, Judas was there and Jesus washed his feet too. Further, he will now demonstrate just how much God loves the world by dying for those who manifestly do not love him. Love is hard because it is self-sacrificing. It means putting the good of the other first, even when it hurts.

How we live the love so epitomized in this paschal mystery is full of challenges. Today's readings prove that, as we see Peter having to explain to the Jewish leaders why he had dinner with those seen as unclean; Jesus having to explain to the disciples that they need to love one another, even amidst the threat that any one of them might betray the community at any time. Jesus says "choose love."

The disciples were commanded to choose love in the aftermath of betrayal and in the midst of uncertainty. This is what it means when Jesus says "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another". This is the kind of love Jesus is asking us to live - love not for guarantees, not for reciprocity, not for assurances, but for the sake of a different way to live in the world. And why? So that the world can come a little closer to knowing God's love.

Often, we think steps towards love demand a major effort. Sometimes, this can be true. But our decision to choose love does not have to be in the face of the most overt and blatant expressions of its opposite. Our lives are full of occasions when we can choose to respond from a place of love rather than one of frustration and anger and judgment. Choosing love is not only a different way to *live* in the world, but also a different way to *see* the world.

In other words, when you love, you can more easily see the love that surrounds you. When you love, you can more readily recognize acts of love. When you love, you can more clearly sense expressions of love.

Jesus did more than just speak of love. As this scene reminds us, above and beyond Jesus' *command* to love is his actual *act* of love. Jesus goes to the cross to demonstrate that, in fact, "God so loved the world." Jesus did not go to the cross to make God more loving, or to satisfy God's justice, or to take on our punishment. Jesus went to the cross to show in word and deed that God is love and that we, as God's children, are loved.

So whether we succeed or fail in our attempts to love one another this week, still God in Jesus loves us more than we can possibly imagine. And hearing of this love we are set free and sent forth, once again, to love another.

Let me finish with the closing lines of a poem, 'Touched by an Angel' by Maya Angelou, a 20th century African American poet and writer, who writes this:

And suddenly we see
that love costs all we are
and will ever be.
Yet it is only love
which sets us free.

Maya Angelou (1928-2014)

Choose love. Yes, it may be difficult sometimes, but it will be the only thing that sets you free...

The Lord be with you.