

“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” We heard this reading during Holy Week on Maundy Thursday when Jesus gave us this new commandment. This morning, we hear it on the other side of the Sunday of the Resurrection in the season where we focus on the mysteries of our faith.

The mystery in this short passage is elusive, but for a few subtle clues. The first hint is that all this talk about glory and loving one another as disciples is placed between a deadly betrayal and a devastating denial. Only Jesus is fully aware of the context surrounding this commandment to love—the context of Judas’ betrayal and Peter’s denial that makes this far more than a simple morality lesson.

There is another clue in the reference to this as a *new* commandment to love. In addition to the commandments to love God and our neighbor, the Hebrew Bible contains at least 36 commands to love the stranger. Throughout Torah, the reason given for this moral teaching is that the Israelites themselves were strangers once. The key, for the Jews of the ancient world, was empathy, and if you have ever gotten lost in a country where you could not speak the language or read the signs, then you, too, know what it is like to be a stranger.

But while hospitality and kindness to strangers are still essential, John’s Jesus is introducing something slightly different. Rather than replacing or even enhancing the teachings of Torah, what is about to become new is the *foundation* for a radical love that will alter our consideration of glory in ways that still bewilder us.

Just before this reading there was an exchange between Jesus and Judas, where the two of them are the only ones who know that Judas’ betrayal is at hand. When Judas leaves the room at the opening of our reading, Jesus says to the remaining Apostles, “Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him.”

Just *after* this reading will come another exchange, this time between Jesus and Peter, when only Jesus knows that Peter will deny him three times. And between these two moments, Jesus says, “Now.” In this moment, within this context of betrayal and denial, something has been set in motion. The loving self-giving of the Son of God will become the new root, power and pattern of Christian love. The result will be the glory of God radiating from the family of God’s children.

The mystery of our faith begins to take hazy shape.

What most people think of as “glory” is the human-centered glory of a conquering hero, do you see—the kind of glory we expect from competition or that comes with the fame of celebrity. But God-centered glory results from the on-going embodiment of the love poured out for us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; God’s gift of love given for the world. I find it compelling that the Greek can be translated as: “A new command I am giving to you *so that* you may love one another; just as I loved you *so that* that you may love one another.”

John’s Jesus doesn’t mandate his disciples to love their neighbors or Gentiles or strangers. Jesus tells his disciples to love *one another*—to love those who are *already in* the community of Christ. Loving each other, yes, is for all who will see that love and consequently see Christ.

But this was also practical advice to John’s first century church, who were experiencing stress from within the community and pressure from outside. If the early church was going to survive to serve the love of Christ in the world, her people would need to care for one another.

The churn of differing perspectives and passions over doctrine and practice would tear the church apart from the inside if the disciples of Jesus couldn’t love one another. And in John’s time, pressure from the Roman Empire and influences from other religions and cultures could have crushed the early church from the outside. Does any of that sound familiar?

Luke’s church was in a similar situation. They faced less pressure from Jewish sources, but they, too, were experiencing conflict precisely because they were making the church known and felt in a world hostile to it. In the reading from Acts, Luke’s Jesus has sent Peter to the Gentiles, where the Holy Spirit has told him to “make no distinction” between himself and them. As a result, not only did the Spirit open Peter and the whole Jerusalem church to a larger view of ministry, but the Spirit fell on *everyone* in that house—slaves, women, and children—as Peter baptized them. Through Peter’s love, the Holy Spirit brought these people into the family of Christ.

In other words, from the beginning, the church has been grounded in the self-emptying love of Jesus Christ; a love that manifests in a variety of ways. John’s Jesus mandated that we embody this love by showing the Light of Christ to the world. Luke’s Jesus emphasized that we embody this love by serving people on the margins and those different than ourselves.

Being a disciple in both these circumstances meant loving the whole people of God into community, because that’s the way that Jesus loved. Jesus loved people into recognizing themselves to be children of God by

befriending and eating with outcasts and sinners, collaborators and prostitutes, the ritually impure, and the unloved. Jesus loved people by stretching the boundaries of his own love, even beyond the point of death.

If you have ever fallen in love—and I mean really deeply in love—then you have experienced love that is a small form of dying. Once you have learned to love yourself, love for another person spills over in a way that changes you to the core. As healthy love for someone else blossoms it changes the focus of your desires and fears, your joys and sorrows, even your decisions and your actions. Falling in love, in short, activates our capacity for self-transcendence.

Some people also have the experience of parenthood where love can transcend two people to include others who come into focus without losing themselves or each other in the process. Couples and single people who do not have children can find themselves falling in love in this way with a small collection of dear friends. In those and other situations, love can expand our capacity to love—can move us beyond the boundaries of what we consider ourselves to be. Each new expansion involves a small death of sorts into a new and expanded life.

This pattern shows us that our actual physical death is just the last and best opportunity to trust a gracious God who has illumined all our days. We discover that the movement of love has been and always will be nothing less than the movement of the Holy Spirit through us and around us and beyond us. In this realization, bright promise and luminous hope conquer dark and frightening fear and despair. That is the glory of God.

“Write this,” said the voice from the throne of God in the book of Revelation, “for these words are trustworthy and true... *It is done!* I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water from the spring of the water of life.”

Christ, the slaughtered lamb who now sits on the throne of God, loves us so that we can love in ever more Christ-like ways—in ever-widening circles with fewer and fewer boundaries; loving in endless forms; living and dying for love. Like some parent intent on pushing us to move out, the Holy Spirit will not let us set up house in some small and comfortable corner of creation. The more we mature as practitioners of holy love, the more we notice that the Holy Spirit is pushing us outside of ourselves to love friends, neighbors and strangers as the children of God.

We come together each Sunday to be filled with the water of life and the Word of God and to be reminded that we have the love of Christ—that we have everything we need to embody the Word by living in peace and justice

with all of our neighbors on this earth. We come to be filled and to carry the water of life to those who are thirsty.

When we find ourselves slipping into arguments over liturgy, scriptural authority, human sexuality, politics and so forth, the mandate that we remember to love each other is central. When we find ourselves in conflict with other perspectives, another parishioner, a spouse, the vestry or the rector, trying to see our brother or sister as Christ sees them and loves them will change the way we act, even if we still disagree.

“These days,” writes Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor, “I guess everything sounds like a position, even a confession like this one. I do not know what is right. All I know is whom I love, and how far I have to go before there is no one left whom I do not love. If I am wrong, then I figure that the Word of God will know what to do with me. I am betting my life on that.”<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Brown Taylor, Barbara “Where the Bible Leads Me.” *Christian Century*. October 18, 2003