

Fifth Sunday of Easter  
Revelation 21:1-6; Psalm 148; John 13:31-35  
May 2, 2010  
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Some of you remember Norm Baty. He was the interim rector here before I came twenty years ago. He served Christ and Grace in that capacity for about a year in 1989 and 1990. He was well loved and appreciated here and helped prepare this congregation for a new priest after Boston Lackey's long thirty-six year pastorate. When the mantle of leadership was passed on to me, Norm said, "David, just love them; just love them." I've never forgotten his words to me.

This simple instruction sounds very similar to some of Jesus' parting words to his disciples on the eve of his crucifixion: "Love one another...just as I have loved you, you should also love one another." "Just love them" and "love one another just I have loved you," sound so simple. It sounds like a hallmark card we'd want to give on Valentine's Day.

If it were that simple, there would be one Christian denomination rather than hundreds. Let's be honest: We've failed to love one another as Jesus loved us. It sounds so simple in theory, but it's hard in practice.

How did Jesus love us? At the last supper with his disciples, Jesus got up from the table after they finished their meal, and he proceeded to wash the disciple's feet. His disciples were shocked because while foot washing was a common practice when guests came into one's home, the master of the home would never have done it. It was the household servant's duty or a wife's if they didn't have servants.

Peter, you'll remember, initially refused to allow Jesus the indignity of washing his feet. Self-giving service, even on bended knee, is the way Jesus loves. Furthermore, beyond getting his hands dirty with road filth, Jesus will shed his blood and undergo suffering, pain and death in love for humankind.

Of course we don't love one another as he loved us. It could be demeaning, embarrassing, inconvenient or painful. That doesn't compute when nearly everything in our culture is meant to make life easier, more comfortable, less risky, sanitized and effortless.

That kind of love may have been fine for Jesus back then, but times have changed. Love now means writing a check or sending an email message. Of course, I am exaggerating....a little.

When was the last time you woke up on Saturday morning and thought, "What can I do for others today? How many people can I serve?" My thinking more often goes like this,

“I’ve worked hard all week. What can I do to be good myself? How can I recharge my batteries?”

Then there is the issue of people in the church who rub me the wrong way or I find difficult to be around. The easiest thing is to avoid them, ignore them and label them, convinced they don’t deserve my love anyway. Why should I love them if they don’t treat me the way I want to be treated?

The only reason to always return love, to always do and say what is in the best interest of the other is because Jesus said to and he loves everyone. That doesn’t mean we have to be dishonest or disingenuous or become door mats.

A reporter for the Philadelphia Inquirer had attended Catholic Schools as a child. In an article for the paper, he mentioned one of the nuns he remembered. He wrote that her nickname was Bulldog, and he described her as a “seraphic six-winged Frankenstein monster.” Still angry so many years later.

After the article hit the streets, the reporter received a call from a nun – a certain Sister Maria. You might imagine a livid nun demanding a public apology. In fact Sister Maria said as kindly as possible, “You’ve done a big disservice to sisters.”

The reporter felt a bit guilty when he hung up and assumed that was the end of it. However, Sister Maria maintained a friendly correspondence with the reporter such that in a time of grief over the death of his stepfather, he turned to her for consolation. A year later he visited her at a Catholic retreat house.

Upon her death, the reporter wrote “... that day on the phone, Sister Maria gave me a moment of insight, a gift far greater than anything I could give her.” And of his ongoing relationship with her he wrote, “Like sunshine and salt breezes on a summer’s day by the sea, her words still nourish my soul.”

The hardest thing is to care deeply for someone who doesn’t reciprocate or has been hurtful toward us. Yet Jesus doesn’t say, “Love only those who love you back.”

St. Paul, writing to the Galatians, said, “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” (Galatians 2:20) Once converted and baptized, Paul loved others with the power of God the Holy Spirit, which baptism planted in him. Our love is to be like Jesus’ love because we, too, have Christ living in us. We can no longer be satisfied to love as the rest of the world does. Our love needs to be so patient and kind, humble and self-effacing, generous and forgiving that outsiders will sit up and take notice: “See how they love one another.” “They are Jesus’ disciples.”

It will have to be God’s doing. We each need to ask for divine power and grace. We need to mean it when we confess that we have not loved our neighbor as ourselves, in thought word and deed, things done and left undone.

The following is about love of God but applies to neighbor as well. The only way to love God, whom we can't see, is to love people we can see. St. Frances de Sales (a Roman Catholic saint) was once approached by a disciple who said to him, "Sir, you speak so much about the love of God, but you never tell us how to achieve it. Won't you tell me how one comes to love God?"

St. Francis replied, "There is only one way and that is to love Him."

"But you don't understand my question. What I asked was, 'How do you engender this love of God?'"

And Francis said, "By loving Him."

Once again the pupil came back with the same question. "But what steps do you take? Just what do you do in order to come into the possession of this love?"

And all St. Francis said was, "You begin by loving and you go on loving, and loving teaches you how to love. And the more you love, the more you learn to love."

If Jesus were teaching us about love today, he might say, "Just do it." Amen.