

Fifth Sunday of Easter
Acts 11:1-8
Psalm 148
Revelation 21:1-6
John 13:31-35

Rev. Lindsey Jorgensen-Skakum
Holy Spirit Lutheran Church
May 19, 2019

Grace and peace to you all from our Lord and saviour Jesus Christ - Amen.

If you knew you were about to die, what would you tell the people you love?

What cherished hope or dream would you share?

What last, urgent piece of advice would you offer up for the world?

This morning, we hear Jesus answer this difficult question.

In our Gospel reading we find him in the upper room with the disciples. Judas has just left the Last Supper in order to carry out his betrayal, and the clock winding down to Christ's crucifixion is about to call for his departure from this world.

Knowing that his disciples were about to face the greatest devastation of their ministry and likely their lives – Jesus chooses to get right to the point.

No parables, no stories or no sayings this time - just one simple commandment summarizing Jesus's deepest desire for his followers: "Love one another."

He doesn't say, "Believe the right things."

He doesn't say, "Worship like this or attend a church like that."

He doesn't even say, "read your bible," or "pray every day," or even "remember to give your offering."

He simply says, "Love one another."

That's it.

Yet, if there is one thing I know about loving others – it's that it isn't always the easiest thing to do.

When I look at my own life, it's not too hard to name why I at times fail to obey Jesus' central commandment. Love is vulnerable, and if truth be told I'd rather not be vulnerable – especially if its going to leave my emotions, thoughts, and feelings exposed.

Love requires trust, and while I'm willing to trust those who I think have earned it - I've been taught by this world to be naturally suspicious of those I don't know.

Love is messy. It spills over margins and boundaries, creating new and uncharted pathways forward. Pathways that can lead to places I feel unprepared to go.

Love also takes time, effort, discipline, and transformation, and if I'm being honest - I don't always feel I have the time or the mental energy to love others let alone myself.

And yet Jesus didn't say, "This is my suggestion." Or even this is my hope. He said, "This is my commandment." Meaning, it's truly not a choice we are privileged to make. It's not a matter of personal preference; it's a matter of the mark we are to bear if we are to be the children of God.

But many of us have a hard time with this thing called love. We have all come to be shaped by the culture of our day: by Hollywood's expectations, Valentine's Day commercialism, or by the poetic lines of romantic songs from across the ages, which all evoke a certain image of love. And as a result, we tend to think of love as spontaneous and free-flowing. When asked about love we say things like:

We fall in love.

Love is blind

It happens at first sight.

It breaks our hearts.

And it can even take our breath away.

Even if we put our culture's clichés aside, we know that authentic love can't be manipulated, simulated, or rushed without some form of conflict or suffering.

Those of us who have kids in our lives understand full well that commanding them to simply "love each other" never works well. The most we can do is insist that they behave as if they love each other: "Share your toys." "Say sorry." "Don't hit." "Use kind words." But these actions — often performed with gritted teeth and rolling eyes — aren't the same as what Jesus is talking about.

Jesus doesn't say, "Act as if you love one another." He doesn't give his disciples - or us - the easy "out" of doing nice things with clenched hearts. He says, "Love as I have loved you."

As in, for real.

As in, the whole bona fide package - authentic feeling, deep engagement, generous and genuine action — love.

Doesn't it sound like Jesus is asking for the impossible?

Maybe he is.

G.K Chesterton once wrote that *"The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried."*

Imagine what would happen to us, to the Church, to the world, if we took this commandment of Jesus's seriously?

What would it look like if we obeyed this commandment and cultivated this seemingly "impossible" love?

I ask these questions, because I don't know how to answer them, even for myself. I mean, I know fairly well how to do things. I know how to make care packages for the homeless. Or bring dessert to the church potluck. Or check in on my friends. But do I know how to love as Jesus loved?

To feel a depth of compassion that hits me in the gut? To experience a hunger for justice so fierce and so urgent that I rearrange my life in order to pursue it? To empathize until my heart breaks?

Maybe the question truly is - do I really want to?

Most of the time — I'll be honest — I don't. I want to be safe. I want to keep my circle small and manageable. And I want to choose the people I love based on my own affinities and preferences — not on Jesus's all-inclusive commandment. Charitable actions are easy. But cultivating my heart? Preparing and pruning it to love? Becoming vulnerable in authentic ways to the world's pain? Those things are hard.

And yet this was Jesus's dying wish for not only his disciples but also his church. Which means that we have a God who first and foremost wants every one of his children to feel loved. Not shamed. Not punished. Not chastised. Not judged. Not isolated. But loved.

But that's not all. Jesus follows his commandment with an exhilarating and terrifying promise: "By this everyone will know you are my disciples." Meaning, this kind of love will be the litmus test of our lives as followers of Jesus.

Our love for each other is how the world will know who we are and whose we are. Our love for each other is how the world will see, taste, touch, hear, and find Jesus. It's through our love that we will embody Jesus, make Jesus relatable, possible, plausible, to a dying world.

This is the power we wield in our decisions to love or not to love. Such are the stakes involved in how we choose to respond to Jesus's dying wish, hope, prayer, and commandment for our community.

And here's our saving grace in the midst of it all: Jesus doesn't leave us alone. We are not direction-less in the wilderness. He gives us a road map, a clear and beautiful way forward when he says you are to love "As I have loved you."

Follow my example, he says. Do what I do. Love as I love. Live as you have seen me live. Weep with those who weep. Laugh with those who laugh. Touch the untouchables. Feed the hungry. Welcome the child. Release the captive. Forgive the sinner. Confront the oppressor. Comfort the oppressed. Wash each other's feet. Hold each other close. Tell each other the truth. Guide each other home.

In other words, Jesus's commandment to us is not that we should wear ourselves out, trying to produce love from our own easily depleted resources. Rather, it's that we're invited to abide in the holy place where all love originates.

We can make our home in Jesus's love — the most abundant and inexhaustible love in existence. Our love is not our own; it is God's, and God our source is without limit, without end. There are no parched places God will not drench if we ask.

So let us ask, that we would continue to be a people drenched in Christ's abundant and inclusive love as we are called together to consider the future of our ministry with and among each other here at Holy Spirit. May we do so trusting that no matter the outcome of the congregational call meeting that we will continue to be a people called to a deep love and support of one another within this ministry and community of faith we have come to know and trust – and it is my prayer and hope that this holy love will continue to be the mark of God's ministry with and among us.

So let us love one another as Christ has loved us - and may this be so among us. Amen.