

Alleluia! Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

It's the fifth Sunday of Easter and the end of the season is nigh. We continue to celebrate the resurrection of Christ's triumph over death, but with the end steadily approaching, Jesus is beginning to prepare us for it to be over. He is preparing us with the disciples for the time when he goes where we cannot follow.

That's what's happening in our gospel reading - Jesus preparing the disciples for his leaving them. Remember with me, we heard this reading not long ago - the night of Maundy Thursday, the night of Jesus' betrayal and arrest. That night we washed each other's feet and celebrated communion - these interconnected actions by Jesus that showed us embodied, self-giving love. That whole night is the final preparation Jesus gives us before he is arrested and crucified.

But here we are | on the other side of the resurrection, about to see Jesus taken away from us again. It will be a very different scene but Jesus will soon be absent, all the same: The Day of Ascension is coming - this year, May 26. The author of Luke gives us two tellings of the Ascension - an abbreviated one at the end of Luke and a fuller version in the book of Acts. In that account, Jesus says to the disciples, **“you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”** Then Jesus is lifted up and taken “out of their sight”.

“Little Children, I am with you only a little longer,” he says. “You will look for me [but] where I am going you cannot come.” The Ascension is coming, and the lectionary thrusts us back in time to the night of the Passover and Jesus | preparing us for his absence. And he prepares us | by telling us | to love one another.

To speak of love is something like pointing at the moon. This little word is a finger, pointing up to something beyond our ability to completely understand or even describe. We each know the idea of love only dimly, through our own experience of it. And our experience is always only a slice of the whole - it's limited. But this is Jesus' commandment, his final preparing remark to the disciples - to Love one another. What does this really mean?

With Jesus leaving this circle of intimate friends and followers, it probably includes the idea that we support one another, that we carry on and continue holding each other in the love in which he first held us. But does it mean only those gathered around the table at that meal? That would be a problem if Jesus' love was to be locked away among the select few. Indeed, we would likely not be gathered in this room today without that love having been shared beyond the boundaries of that gathering. And truly, "God so loved the world" right? Jesus isn't saying here "love only one another." He's saying "love one another and every other - the world over."

Here though, is another difficulty with love. Hearing it this way (Love everybody!) makes it seem light and fluffy, soft and cuddly, a little too ill-defined and Love can so easily be reduced to sentimental platitudes. But I think Jesus is speaking of love here as something more substantial, more consequential, weighted, even serious.

I read a number of articles this week by a Virginia pastor named Sarah Scherschligt. Thinking about Christian communities and belonging, she reflects on Jesus' commandment using our reading from the book of Acts. She says that the vision of Peter described in that reading is "...one of the most consequential moments in the early church."

Three times, a large sheet comes down from heaven, lowered by its corners and comes close to Peter. Four footed animals and birds appear upon it. A voice tells him to "kill and eat." Peter protests, calling these animals unclean. And the voice tells him "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." That's the vision. But the consequences of this vision have reverberated ever since.

Peter goes with the men sent from Caesarea, to the household that sent for him, where they'd had their own vision. An angel had told them "[Go get] Simon, who is called Peter; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved. And as I began to speak," it reads, "the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning."

Acts tells the story, then Peter re-tells it to "the apostles and believers" who are upset by its implications. In its retelling, Acts re-emphasises this story, making clear that this is a key turning point. For what people ate in the time of Jesus mattered. Identity was at stake. People who ate the animals that appeared to Peter on that "sheet" disobeyed the Law of Moses, and were considered unclean outsiders unworthy of inclusion among God's chosen people. Jesus' ministry and that of Peter up till now, was almost exclusively aimed at these chosen people, their fellow Jews. But **the Holy Spirit in this vision tells Peter to make no distinction between them & us.**

That's quite the statement isn't it? In some ways it supports a point of view I've encountered recently that "gets stuck" when I draw distinctions between people. I did it a lot more when I first arrived in speaking about the experience of African Americans in the United States and of LGBTQ folks here in Montana. What I've been doing in our monthly Newsletters, telling the history of indigenous people in Montana and the US, is in part | drawing a distinction. **"Why do you need to point out our differences? Aren't we all just people?"** These are questions I get asked every so often. The Spirit (in this retelling of what Peter's just gone through) tells him explicitly not to make a distinction between them and us.

I'm not going to disagree with the Spirit. But being clear about these distinctions does have a bearing on the way we love people inside and outside these walls. When Jesus said, "love one another... as I have loved you" I don't think he was saying "love one another all in one way." I think reflected in the way Jesus loved these disciples, and all people who came in contact with him, is **a love that is specific, even distinct**. Take his healings for instance: It was not one kind of healing he performed for the paralyzed man and the man born blind - he addressed each ailment, each affliction - (he loved each person) according to their need.

When I draw those distinctions, I'm drawing distinctions between our needs. Certain needs all people share: Food, water, healthcare, education etc. But when we fail to see or acknowledge differences (including systemic differences that affect access to such basics), the love we are charged with, the love we seek to share, **fails to be the love of Jesus**. What the Spirit is telling Peter is that everyone, all people, without distinction, are in need of receiving the gift we have been given in Christ. But that love has been given to all distinctly, according to their need. In preparing us for his leaving, that is the new commandment Jesus gives us - to love one another as he first loved us.

“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” How much more specific could Jesus have been? He gives this loving instruction so specifically in order to help us bear witness to that love, to his love. By loving one another and every other - all the world, distinctly - we bear witness to the love of God in Jesus for all people.

And here, love becomes something difficult, tangible, visible and necessary. For when we draw distinctions around need, we are talking about distinctions in justice. When Cornel West calls “justice... what love looks like in public,” he helps us see the implications of Jesus’ command to love one another.

When I learned the American Indian history I’m sharing with you and the ongoing challenges they face here in Montana and across the US, one of my teachers (Joanne) talked about how best to address these challenges. There is a temptation for well meaning people trying to help address the problems of others to “steam-roll” those suffering from the problem. The solution becomes more important than the person suffering, even when the suffering person sees the problem more clearly and might actually see the solution that’s needed. Steam-rolling is not the love of Jesus, is it? For Jesus showed us not only love, but the purpose of love - he showed us that love means nothing without relationship.

To truly address the needs and suffering of others is to come alongside the sufferer, not to overpower them. Rather, we enter into a partnership in which we seek not to lead but to listen. “Even,” she said, “even and especially when anger is expressed. Listening, even and especially,” she said, “to the un-digestible, the unpalatable, those who’s suffering comes out sideways - that builds trust.” Could listening and taking on the challenges people face as a supporting partner the way love might look for us in this time and place?

Love might also look another way. Jesus was clear that the disciples were to start by loving one another. In the midst of the anxiety we might be starting to feel around construction having begun on the new building, around the listing of our current building, and what might happen if we sell before construction is complete, it's easy to forget about each other. In preparation for an unfamiliar, unsure and perhaps frightening future (even on this side of the resurrection!), Jesus told his disciples to love each other.

It's easy for young pastors in small congregations to focus attention on outreach - how it is that we reach more people and swell the ranks on Sunday mornings. But what I'm talking about now is our inreach.

Are there folks you haven't seen for a while, about whom you've wondered how they are? Are there folks **in this room with you now** who you haven't spoken to in a few weeks, or ever? Are there unfamiliar faces whose names you'd like to know? Jesus is telling us to love one another, I believe, because the better we are at loving each other, the better we are at loving others, even every other. The love we cultivate here in the care of and curiosity about each other will spill over. That spilling over is the purpose of Peter's vision, the purpose of Jesus' instruction.

Where he goes we cannot follow, but Jesus left us a means of creating the kingdom here - a kingdom that grows by overflowing. We'll hear more about the overflowing of that kingdom in the weeks to come. But for now...

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.