

6th Sunday of Easter – 2021B

“Love one another.” These final words of the Gospel can evoke a certain “ho hum” response. Same old, same old. “Love one another”—of course. But there are certain times when we become aware of their challenge again, and how impossible living out these simple words can be, day in, day out. And not just with people who have totally different values, but even with those nearest and dearest.

Years ago I spent hours with the Tyrone family. They are at the heart of Eugene O’Neill’s play **Long Day’s Journey into Night**: James, Mary, Jamie, and Edmund. Reading or seeing this play is an extraordinary experience! It is also an exhausting one because you see this family tear and lash out at one another. Endless regrets and recriminations. Wounds revealed and reviled. James, the father, is revealed as a man who clings to his money, using it to buy land, even at the expense of his wife’s health, and now at that of his youngest son’s health. Mary, wife and mother, harping and carping at her husband, then at her sons, for past failures, while secretly hastening toward the sanctuary that only morphine can provide. Jamie, the oldest son, alcoholic, is plagued by guilt over something he did as a child. Edmund holds himself accountable for his mother being a drug addict, since she became addicted at the time of his birth; now he himself is threatened by tuberculosis.

The literary critic Harold Bloom said this play portrays “the helplessness of family love,” revealing how incapable it is “to sustain, let alone heal, the wounds of marriage, of parenthood, and of sonship.” In O’Neill’s world, happiness does not linger long.

Even though life can seem stacked against us, with little help at times seeming to come from without, or within, there still remains a sense of

abiding hope. We all know in our bones that something is eternal and that something has to do with human beings. There's something way down deep that's eternal about every human being.

The Gospel of John puts us in touch with that "something," especially in this last speech of Jesus when he talks about his relationship with his disciples and with the Father, and our relationship with one another. Jesus gets us to the bottom line when he commands his disciples: "Love one another."

But remember that today's words follow after what we heard last week, and that is the basis for the command we hear today. Last week we heard Jesus proclaim, "I am the vine, you are the branches" (John 15:5). And he exhorted his disciples: "Abide in me as I abide in you" (John 15:4). Half a dozen times he says, "Abide in me" which has the sense of taking up permanent residence. Jesus did not come to put in a guest appearance, a cameo performance, merely to show us what to do, and then to return to the Father to sit and watch what we do from a distance. He remains. He abides with us.

And today we heard his words, "Abide in my love."

How do we know we are doing that? When we keep his commandments and the greatest commandment is this: "Love one another."

There are different words for "love" in Greek. **Eros** is the passionate love that seeks to possess the beloved, romantic love, the love of great novels and plays. **Philia** is the love of friendship, rooted in attraction to another, discovering there an emotional bond. But the special word in the New Testament is **agape**: love that is gift, that does not have to do with feeling or attraction. This love is not so much affection as connection, a matter of being with and doing for another. You don't even have to like the other, but you do have to love. This is the love that Jesus empowers in his

disciples: “You did not choose me, but I chose you and I appointed you to go and bear fruit that will last.” This love is a gift of God. “Everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God. Whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love.”

We see this love as a gift in the first reading from Acts.

Peter gets to the house of Cornelius, a Roman soldier, one of an occupying force not known for love, a Gentile that Jews were taught to avoid lest they become impure. We hear Peter’s words of acceptance: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.” The interesting moment in this reading is when it says that while Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who were listening to the word.

Notice the word “fell.” The Holy Spirit **fell** upon all who were listening to the word, like God, who just can’t wait to take up residence in our hearts, to begin to penetrate our being like any lover. The Holy Spirit **fell** upon them. They hadn’t even been baptized yet.

The Holy Spirit is ahead of Peter and the first community, ahead of the church. The pattern is set; the burden is on **us** to be on the lookout for where the Holy Spirit is up and operating, impatient to be about the work to be done. This wild, unbridled, uncontrollable spirit, the breath, and wind of God, its tongue licking us. This Holy Spirit, waiting to set us on fire.

Easter joy is God’s will for us. A joy rooted in connection and affection, God’s affection for us, in Jesus’ affection for us who hear his call to live as disciples. Jesus’ words today are intimate in a different way from last week’s. “I no longer call you servants ... I have called you friends.” **Friend** is an overused word in our culture, often used when we mean an acquaintance. But a friend is one that has made a commitment to be there through it all.

The word **friend** is rooted in Old English, where it means both “to love” and “to free”; to love another freely, as a gift, and to love in a way that frees another. A friend’s love is free when there is no price tag, no trying to control or manipulate. Unfortunately the desire to control can creep into any relationship: between husband and wife, parent and child, siblings, and between friends.

“I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know what his master is doing. I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father.” In being our friend, Jesus brings us to know the Father.

The Eucharist we celebrate is the pledge of God’s commitment to us, the revelation of the Father’s love in Jesus, poured out for us. After celebrating and receiving the bread of life, broken for us, and the cup of salvation, poured out for us, we are sent forth into our world: to love God and love one another.

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