

Sixth Sunday of Easter – Year A – May 17, 2020 – The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony
Acts 17:22-31, Psalm 66:7-18, 1 Peter 3:13-22, John 14:15-21

These gospels after Easter are a bit like a weekly television series. They build on each other from week to week. I feel like I might open the sermon by saying “when we last left our hero, Jesus, he was in Jerusalem, celebrating the Passover with a few of his closest friends. They had eaten, he had washed their feet, he had identified the one who would betray him and now he continues with the unwelcome news that he is going away where they cannot come. The story opens with Jesus saying “If you love me you will keep my commandments.” The eleven in that room must have been a bit bewildered by this and even a bit miffed. They had left everything, family, livelihood, reputation and security all to follow Jesus. If that isn’t love they might have thought, then what is? But Jesus had already given them the answer.

Some years ago, there was a popular movie, Love Story. The famous line from that movie defined love as “never having to say you are sorry.” Out of that movie grew a weekly cartoon the caption of which was Love is.....and then a definition. Something like love is washing the dishes. Love is bringing flowers for no reason. The definitions were generally some small act that might be done for the loved one.

For Jesus on that last night with his disciples, the phrase was clear. Love is keeping my commandments. There was no mystery about what Jesus meant. The commandments, the summary of the Torah was clear. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets. Like so many things in life, this was simple and straightforward, easily understandable and difficult to do.

It is often said that many if not all of the religions of the world are based on the commandment to love. Certainly this is true of Judaism, the religion of Jesus and the disciples. What Jesus was asking was not a new concept. I don’t know enough about other world religions to know if they are primarily based on love but I suspect it is true.

So, the real question is what does it mean to love? I am speaking here not of a philosophical proposition or an emotional state of being. The love Jesus is talking about is an action, it is something we choose to do rather than something we only feel. Most theologians would tell you that it is perfectly possible to express love toward someone without actually liking them very much or at all. Liking is an attraction to someone for any number of reasons. To choose to love someone is to act in their best interest without putting what we want first. On occasion the most loving thing may be allowing someone the freedom to make their own choices, even if those are choices you would not make. Jesus spoke relatively infrequently of love. Instead Jesus lived the love he sought to make real in the world. It was in healing, in exorcising, in calming storms and in eating and drinking with sinners that Jesus showed his followers the love that he sought them to live in their own lives. He told stories that illustrated what he himself lived.

Jesus told a parable which we call the parable of the prodigal son. When the son asked his father for his inheritance the father gave the son what he asked. That was love. To ask for one’s inheritance before the parent has died, is as if you were saying that you wished the parent were dead. That is what the son was asking and the father out of love gave him what he

asked. And then, when the son had spent it all and was hungry, broke and desperate, the father took him in, prepared a feast and dressed him in new, rich garments. That was love. And what of the elder son? The son who felt he had been slighted? The father did not say "it is all mine to do with as I please," which might have been a natural reaction to the cold water the elder son was throwing on the father's great joy. Instead, the father came out to the elder son, acknowledged his love for this son as well, and asked him to come in and be a part of the celebration. The father gave the elder son a choice. This too is love.

Or, take the story of the young man described by Matthew as pious, keeping all the commandments. When Jesus responded to him with the command to sell his possessions and give the money to the poor so that he could have treasure in heaven it was too much to ask. The young man went away grieving for he had many possessions. And Jesus allowed him to do. Jesus did not make the requirements less stringent. This was love, both the request and the choice. Had the young man been able to follow where Jesus led he would have received treasure in heaven. But he could not and because Jesus let him go away.

We have been trying to learn the meaning of love as Jesus describes it for some time to now. The Apostle Paul tells the Church in Corinth that "...love is patient; love is kind; not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." Without love Paul says, the individual is 'nothing.' The church at Corinth at the time they received this letter was divided by personal loyalties and interpersonal tension. Not so unlike times in our churches today. And Paul's prescription was love, the choice to love.

Some centuries later, we meet Julian of Norwich, whose feast day was May 8th. Julian was an anchoress, in the late 14th century. As a young woman, she fell gravely ill, was given the last rites and was expected to die. She miraculously recovered. At the same time, she experienced visions of the Lord's Passion. While these brought her peace and joy, she also sought to find their meaning for her. In prayer and meditation for 15 years Julian sought the meaning of the visions she had been given. At the end of that time she was rewarded as the Holy Spirit spoke to her. "Would you learn the Lord's meaning in this thing? Learn it well? Love was his meaning". Julian used the gifts of love given her well. She became a famed mystic and a spiritual counselor. Julian chose love, even though she gave up much and spent long years in the search for meaning. In this she was answering the commandment of Jesus to love God and neighbor.

Perhaps the most sacrificial and graphic example of the choice of love above self is the story in our own time, of Jonathan Daniels. Daniels who was a white seminarian, in 1965 he went to Alabama to march for civil rights. Jailed for joining a picket line, Daniels and 3 others were unexpectedly released from jail. Knowing that they were in danger the four went to a nearby store. First up the steps leading to the entrance was a 16 year old black woman. Then a white man with a gun appeared at the door of the store. Thinking to shield the young woman, Jonathan pulled her aside and as a result was shot and killed with a 12 gauge shot gun blast. Following the commandment of Jesus to love was the choice that Daniels made the choice that led him to Alabama, the choice that led him to march and the choice that caused him to shield a young black woman. It is not always so tragic or dramatic.

In recent Sunday newspapers I've been reading the Rant and Rave column. The first thing I noticed was that there were no rants only raves. That is either good editing or a sign of

people being aware that we are all in this together and ranting doesn't help. A sampling of the raves: There was the gentleman who paid for hand sanitizer when the purchaser had forgotten his wallet, a neighbor who gave away 100 hand sewn masks and to the woman who provided the cloth, there were all the people are creating and maintaining gardens to bring joy to others, and the angel who delivered May baskets filled with fresh flowers to near neighbors. All of these are acts of love of the kind Jesus spoke of.

“Jesus said, If you love me you will keep my commandments.”

But, we do not have to keep those commandments alone or in our own strength. We are promised the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, who was sent to be with the disciples forever. The Holy Spirit that was sent to “abide” with them. A spirit of truth and strength that would guide them as they chose to love and so kept Jesus commandments.

Jesus promised that while he was going away and the world would no longer see him, they would see him in the love that God had for them. The love that God had for them and has for us abides in us. It is that love, lived out by choice that allows God to cross our human limits and enable us to do amazing things in Jesus name. And the best part of the promise to the disciples and to us is life, abundant, holy, blessed life. In the words of Jesus, “...because I live you also will live.”