

Church of the Good Shepherd
and
St. John the Evangelist

6 Easter
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“Abide With Me!”

In the entire history of the world there was never a kingdom, a country or a religion that was founded on the principle of love. Then along came Jesus, bringing his message of love in today’s Gospel, and the world is transformed.

I put it to you today that Jesus’ entire teaching and what he is truly about, is contained in this Gospel passage from John 15: 9-17.

“This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends, if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the father will give you whatever you ask him in my name.”

This is a passage you could spend a lifetime analyzing. What does Jesus mean? Is this kind of love even possible?

The more that I think about this passage, the more I am convinced that this is not the mushy, soft romantic love that you find in Hollywood movies, or paperbacks at the airport. The sort of love Jesus speaks of is tough, painful, enduring and at times gut-wrenching and selfless. I don’t even think that Jesus was talking about the love of a married couple, who stay devoted to each other for fifty years.

“As the father has loved me, so I have loved you!” Jesus’ love is directed to us even though we ourselves are broken, imperfect, damaged, incomplete and often failures.

Thinking how I could illustrate this for you, I couldn’t help but cast my mind back to thirty four years of teaching in schools. In that amount of years you see and experience a lot of teachers. Add your own schooling and you have 46 years of observing teachers and more teachers. There was a time when teachers had a lot more power over “our miserable little lives”, than they do, today. Even in elementary and grammar school we had teachers who thought they were God, acted like God and for all we knew were God. I knew a teacher once, who when he crossed the recreation area every student stopped, whatever the game or sport and just stood frozen to the spot. Teachers had power and they knew it, but of all the many imperfections of teachers the one that was the hardest to forgive were teachers who played the ‘favorite’s game.’

The ‘favorite’s game’ had a variety of applications. Teachers who only taught to the smart kids in the class and left the rest to fend for themselves. Teachers who favored the

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most talented, the sports heroes, the kids who were going to be successful anyway, or teachers who looked after the rich kids because their parents wrote fat checks for the school. You can include a couple of principals among that lot.

Why I compare these with Jesus' command to love is that Jesus himself did not neglect the broken or the marginalized and he even chose his disciples from among them.

Most of us, if we were lucky, came across or encountered one teacher, who was not like the rest, one teacher, who was fair and even handed, one teacher who saw the potential in every child or even went out of their way to help the less fortunate or the less bright or the less talented.

Often they had a motto: "Anyone can teach and be successful with the bright kids, but it takes a special teacher to transform the life and future of the less bright."

In the end, it's not really about teaching. In the end it is about the meaning of the word 'love'. If you love teaching and you love children then you become the teacher every child wants and dreams of having: fair, honest, helpful, kind, understanding, firm and fun. Anything else is not about education; it's about the individual and his frailties.

Jesus is teaching us the same lesson in today's Gospel. How many of us can put our hands on our hearts and honestly say that 'we treat every person in our church and life with the same fairness, kindness, forgiveness and understanding that we expect from others?'

It is a tough question to answer. Not only do we not love everyone, most of the time we find it hard even to like everyone. Truth be told, we don't even love everyone in our own families. Despite all that, Jesus commands us to love despite our differences, despite our preferences, despite our very emotions. Love is about doing the right thing.

Here is why Jesus links love with the commandments. Love is about making the right choices, because they are right. And because it is the right thing to do irrespective of our feelings.

This Gospel tells us that we can say: "Yes Lord, I love you" till the cows come home. But that alone will not make it the case. Love for Jesus is not about words, it is about deeds. If we cannot follow Jesus' command to treat each person we encounter with justice, fairness and equality of treatment, then we can have no part of Jesus. That having been said we belong to another religion, but it is not Christianity.

Why would we make such a choice you ask yourself? Why wouldn't we treat every one with fairness, justice and give to each equality of treatment?

The answer is that we have no trouble responding with love to people who are good to us. We just have problems, when they have hurt us, lied to us, cheated us, or damaged and abused us.

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It is the enduring theme of many a drama: “Who can forgive the unforgivable?”

I can't remember if I told you about Barbara, who is the Prison Chaplain in New Jersey Prison, not fifty miles from here. Most of her clients are on Death Row or are serving 'life' for murder. Her latest campaign concerns a male nurse who killed more than 60 of his own patients over a twenty year period, and probably a lot more than that.

Here is the question my friend poses to herself each working day: “How do you bring Christ's saving love to a person who despises himself so deeply and despises the entire human race and believes he is lost beyond Redemption?”

Pretty Difficult! Yet, each one of us have to acknowledge that it only takes one act of hatred on our part to condemn ourselves to that same deep dark hole. The failure to love, the failure to raise ourselves above our personal hates is a choice to murder the 'Spirit of another person.'

That is why Jesus in today's Gospel says: “If you keep my commandments you will abide in my love.” For he is saying: “If you do not keep my commands, if you live in hate, you cannot stay with me.”

Our choice to hate is not a private foible. It is in essence a choice to reject Christ and his teachings of love.

“Choose life,” says Jesus,” and you choose not to kill your relationships with hate. Choose life and you choose me.”

At the end of the movie “The Scarlet and the Black” Fr. Flannery, the hero, faces the German SS. Colonel who had caused the death of so many people in Rome in World War II.

“Let us put your Christianity to the test,” says the Colonel? “Can you forgive as your Christ forgave? Can you put aside your hatred and help your enemy in your hour of victory? Can you save my wife and children while you despise me and all I stand for?”

Today's Gospel asks each one of us the same question. In Christ's name, can we love the unlovable? If the answer is 'no, we cannot', then we have no place in his church. If the answer is 'yes, yes, I can love the one who hurt me, the one I should despise, I love the unlovable'. If we can say that, then we are already saved and Christ already abides in our heart.

Amen+

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