

5th Sunday of Easter
Church of the Advent at Green Acres
May 19, 2019
Rev. Ellen Richardson

Love One Another, Round 2

Did anyone notice that our Gospel from John read this morning on the 5th Sunday of Eastertide is a repeat, having been read just a few weeks ago during the Maundy Thursday liturgy during Holy Week? Show of hands, and remember it's not a good idea to lie in church... Betting no one would notice, I thought about just using the same sermon from Maundy Thursday because in all likelihood there were so few people attending during Holy Week that not many would have heard it, and if anyone was there and here, too, they probably wouldn't remember it, anyway, right? But then for some holier reason I was struck with the less cynical idea that the repetition of this passage from John is intentional, meant to emphasize that because this command from Jesus is just about the most important thing he ever shared, we need to be reminded of it, again and again: *to love one another*.

A pretty simple and "to the point" command from Jesus--should go without saying, really; yet harder to follow than just about anything. Just ask Peter, who is featured today in our story from the Book of Acts. He had been traveling in Judea, away from his central headquarters in Jerusalem, and doing what Jesus had told the disciples to do. Go and preach, baptize, feed my sheep, love them--*all* of them. And Peter and the disciples had tried to do just that. Trouble was that following this command of Jesus meant that they had to start moving and living outside of restrictive Jewish Law, which in this particular case meant not hanging around--and definitely not sharing meals with--*Outsiders*, people who were *not* part of their group, people who were *not* like them, people who did *not* share their identity as believers in the One God, people who were considered unclean. The name for these Outsiders, these Others, was *Gentile*. Preaching and ministering to the Gentiles as included in the command from Jesus to love one another came with a price. When Peter returned home to Jerusalem in this particular story, the news of his work in the mission field had preceded him, and he was confronted harshly by those who were trying to fit their belief in Jesus into a box that had already been built: *Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?*

Have you ever had that happen? Stepped outside of your comfort zone, acted out of good intentions in an unfamiliar setting, followed your gut to do what you felt called by God to do, only to be overwhelmed later by criticism from someone you told the story to--someone who wasn't there, yet only too willing to berate you--after the fact--for taking the risk, for failing to consider the potential adverse consequences of your actions?

That is what this conversation would have been like for Peter. And he did get a little defensive, though his explanation was as entertaining as it was clever. Peter shared with his critics a vision that sounded like something from another world, full of details and symbols, and because it was a vision, presumed to be sent by God with an important message attached, filled with such detail that though his audience might have thought Peter made it all up on the spot, no one doubted him. It was a little two weird to argue with, *because they weren't there*, and who was brave enough to argue against a direct vision from God? Peter finally silenced them with this: *If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?*

What if we could tack this line on to the command to love one another, and believe it, as if we had heard it in our own private vision? How could that change our lives and change the world if we believed that "one another" included everyone? It is not so hard to apply *love one another* to the people we already love and the people we don't know yet who will be easy to love, but what about widening the circle to friends of our loved ones? Friends of friends? Colleagues perhaps? Members of those clubs and institutions to which we belong or have been a part of our lives? What about our neighborhood neighbors, or at least the ones we have met? Could we extend that love to our whole town, our county, state, country, continent, world? Do we really have to love *everyone*, when we know that *everyone* does not love us? Can't we stick to Christian believers, or at least those who believe in the Christ we know? And it should be alright to narrow our love down to our own political bedfellows, right, because surely we are not meant to love the devil?

When God our Creator sits upon the throne of the heavens and says *I am making all things new*, then we are meant to look at *all* things in a new way, especially the command to

love one another as God first loved us. If we believe as we have been taught that God loves us unconditionally, openly, and forgivingly, then are we not to pay that love forward to everyone else, even the Gentiles in our life, in our world? Of course we can concede that we should love those who make our lives richer and more meaningful. Beyond that, in the words of Peter, because we have been baptized not just by water but by the Holy Spirit, we are to reach out with that love to those Others we would rather stay in a parallel universe: people who don't speak our language, people who don't value what we value, people who by their lack of achievement in this life we prefer to think of as lazy or worthless or just too much trouble. People we barely notice, people who are a different color, from a different culture or country. People whose needs



overwhelm us or make us fear that loving them will cost us too much. People who don't deserve our love and attention. There are so many people in this world--across continents and oceans and just a few streets away--who need the love of God, yet we--God's beloved--are so often bound up in our fears of what they will take from us that instead of greeting them with,

come here and take my place at the table, we are more likely to say, *how can we possibly eat with them?* The story of a woman recently being arrested for giving water to lost and dehydrated refugees near the Southern border is a perfect metaphor for this, because it is easier to blame others for their situations than to use our abundance of gifts to figure out how to love and care for them.

Though we heard from the Book of Revelation today that the Lord, the Alpha and the Omega said, *to the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life,* we would rather not believe that *we* might be the intended means to accomplish God's purposes in our broken and complicated world. It is easier to think of those outside our immediate sphere of responsibility as *Gentiles* than to open ourselves up to the possibility that God may be doing *something new* in them, and in us.

So today's message is that to love one another deserves a second pass and a second look this Eastertide. It deserves enough attention for us to realize the commandment goes beyond the call to love those beside us at this loving gathering and the communities it represents, beyond the

relationships grown in our particular lives over time, beyond those we feel might be worthy of it. Gatherings like this do help us practice loving one another, but beyond that they build us up and give us strength and courage to model that love in the world, full of all kinds of Others, thirsty for the water of life. Amen.