

EASTER SIX, YEAR B, MAY 5, 2024

Have you ever tried to tell your children or grandchildren how to feel? Have you ever told them that they need to be happy or cheerful or that they shouldn't complain about anything because they have it pretty good? If you have tried such an experiment of commanding another's feelings, doubtless you have discovered it is an exercise in futility. Feelings cannot be commanded. So, if feelings can't be commanded how can love be. That's exactly what Jesus said in today's Gospel, "This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you."

Most of us are probably saying, "That's not even remotely feasible since I can't stand so and so or what that person stands for" so how am I supposed to love that person. It's difficult to get beyond our own visceral reactions to not just some people, but ideas as well. It's an age old dilemma of how to treat and interact with someone who is totally the opposite of who we are and what we believe. Yet, this is what Jesus commands of us.

In the Bible, however, love is an action word. Most often it refers to an activity, not a feeling at all. In fact, in Jesus' own words for this morning he tells us, "greater love has no one than he lay down his life for his friends." That's love in action, love as a self-sacrificial deed. But not many of us are put into a situation where we would lay our lives down for someone else let alone a stranger. We all know it's difficult enough to love the ones closest to us so how can we be commanded to love as God does

Think of it this way. Jesus loves us just as God love us all, broken and difficult as we might be, without regard to where we live or what we eat or how we pray or who we love...or can't manage to love. Jesus and God simply love us, it's unconditional, and given freely, and not because of anything we have said or done or felt. In fact this love is often given in spite of what we have said or done or felt. It is pure grace. It is undeserved, unearned and lavishly poured out by God into our lives. The key then is that for human beings to love as God and Jesus have commanded us, we must first be open to receiving that love from God."

So let's put this into context as to why Jesus believed this was vitally important to pass on. The gospel this morning takes place right before Jesus is arrested and taken away to be crucified. He is speaking to his disciples and is making it clear what he has been about. He is summing up his life, his ministry, his purpose and the purpose of his disciples. He basically is telling them, it hasn't been about political change. It hasn't been about moral purity or the acquisition of power. It has all been about love. Jesus points them to his love of God and of his friends. More importantly, it's about his love of those who are hurting, struggling, sick, lonely, fearful. Jesus wants his disciples to know that it is all about love. And if you want to follow him, then they need to love God, love one another, and love everyone God places in front of them.

Obviously, this is not love as emotion. It isn't the command to feel a certain way. It is love as action. The love we are called to embrace is concern and care and the well being of each person we encounter. It is a concern for the other person that runs so deep we may even choose to give our lives for the sake of another. And while real love has serious implications for political change, for social justice, and for our moral behavior, it's the love that's primary. When we love as Jesus loved, almost everything else follows.

A preacher once say, "To say that the answer to the world's problems is for people to love each other more is both right and banal at the same time. It sounds wonderful and grand. But when you sit eyeball to eyeball with another person, especially one who is cantankerous, obnoxious, difficult, unlovely, and seemingly unlovable, it is anything but an easy task." Real love has nothing to do with the kind feelings we may or may not have for others. To love as Jesus loved, means for us to act in certain ways with whom we come into contact. To love one another as I have loved you is a commandment for a reason. Love is not all hearts and flowers. It's work. It wears us out. Real love is a verb we choose to live out from one day to the next. It's not easy or painless.

Love is the heart of it all. It's what finally matters for every human being, Christian or not. Because when we love God is in us and we are in God, whether we believe in God or not. Coming to church doesn't save our souls. But it shows us the things that do—love, forgiveness, compassion and it enables us to receive Christ's energy and Spirit, which make those things possible.

Dean Hollerith of our Washington National Cathedral commented on two people who lived that kind of love and whose busts and carvings are in the Human Rights Porch of the Cathedral. The first is of Óscar Romero who was the archbishop of San Salvador." Romero was a deeply faithful man, who was assassinated in 1980 because of his efforts to put love into action. During his ministry, Romero came to see that love had to be more than the church's efforts to save souls. Real love had to include caring for the day to day realities of the people placed in his care. And as a person of power and influence, that meant that he had to speak out against government corruption, and government violence, and government repression that was destroying the lives of so many people in San Salvador. As a result, Romero was repeatedly warned to stick with the gospel and to stay away from politics. But what the archbishop knew was that he could not obey the demands of the gospel, the command to love others as Jesus loved us without speaking out, without acting on behalf of those who were being oppressed and abused and killed. Loving was much more than simply trying to help someone get into heaven, it was helping someone in the here and now. Ultimately, this kind of love in action cost him his life.

There is also another carving in the Human Rights Porch of the Cathedral that was just finished 3 years ago. It's a bust of Elie Wiesel, the Holocaust survivor, the author, the human rights advocate, and the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize. Wiesel once wrote, "The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference. The opposite of art is not ugliness, it's indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference. And the opposite of life is not death, it's indifference." Real love takes courage. It means getting involved, getting our hands dirty. It means stepping out and speaking up for what is true and right and godly. But truth is, I think, in each of our lives, we are either moving towards love or we are moving towards fear. Fear makes us pull back, pull in, hunker down, protect ourselves first and foremost. Fear makes us indifferent to the lives of others. Whereas love pushes us forward, pushes us outward, away from ourselves, away from our self-focused concerns. Love prods us to give, to risk, to take a stand, to reach out a hand, to care for our neighbors."

Remember what Jesus tells us today. He says, "You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit that will last." If you consider

yourself a Christian, then you have been chosen. You have been chosen to carry on the work that Jesus gave us to do. As Alice Walker once wrote, "Our last five minutes on earth are running out. We can spend those minutes in meanness, exclusivity, and self-righteous disparagement of those who are different from us, or we can spend them consciously embracing every glowing soul who wanders within our reach – those who, without our caring, would find the vibrant, exhilarating path of life just another sad and forsaken road." It's up to us. So, wherever you are, in whatever way you can, reach out, speak out, act out in love." Amen.