

Easter 5C. May 19, 2019. John 13:31-35; Acts 11:1-18.

We've reached the time when our Easter joy has decidedly gotten a little frayed around the edges. We can remember that ecstatic burst of hope, but it no longer feels like it is propelling us anywhere. The lilies are looking a bit worse for wear. The school schedule has entered that frenzied period of constant year-end performances, games, obligatory celebrations, and studying. Work has gone back from being the place we returned to after Easter to being just the place where we usually are. And just when we're beginning to wonder why it is still Easter, something very strange happens in today's readings: the gospel thrusts us back into Holy Week.

This passage from John is part of what we read on Maundy Thursday. It is the night before Jesus is killed. He has washed the disciples' feet; he is preparing them for the events of the next few days and, indeed, for life after Easter. He is preparing them to be left behind, for where he is going, they cannot come. But he leaves them with the command of what they can do: to love one another as he has loved them—to make their discipleship and loyalties known by the quality of their love.

To hear this command in mid-Easter season is different from how we usually hear it. For those of us who come on Maundy Thursday, it is usually a last bracing deep breath before we plunge into Jesus' final hours. Today, though, it is a buttress for our flagging Easter spirits. I am glad to encounter it now, as life turns back to normal, or at least what passes for normal these days. Because Holy Week can come to feel like a time apart, something unique in the year. We do things then that we just don't do at other times.

And it makes intuitive sense that certain virtues that are essential when we are moving towards mysteries of agony and ecstasy may be less relevant in the quotidian, monotonous hurly-burly of a life that is always moving too quickly, whether it's going anywhere or not. So we might think that this command, even this identity, of love is especially appropriate for the times when life is searing. When the colors are a little bit more intense, the air thicker, the stakes higher. What does it take to face down crucifixion and to emerge victorious from the grave? We can only do it through the love that we have learned from Jesus Christ.

But here it is again, when we've almost forgotten the agonies of Good Friday for the annoyances of daily life five weeks later. Its reappearance reminds us that this command to love cannot be contained to only certain situations. It is not the commandment for the extreme, but for every time. The same virtue is the foundation of who we are through the holiest, the dullest, the most painful, the most beautiful, the newest, and the most familiar situations. Wherever we are, it is the love we have learned from Christ that makes us ourselves.

In John, this love threatens to be claustrophobic, bound in by the little room the disciples are gathered in. "Love one another." And who counts as "one another"? There's every reason to believe that these first friends of Jesus may have thought that Jesus meant

“you eleven guys, make sure you love all eleven of you.” And so it’s all the better that we have also been reading from the book of Acts as the Holy Spirit continually breaks the bonds that expectations set for God. If the earliest church was willing to go outside the four walls of the upper room, it didn’t want to go too far outside them. Earliest Christianity is tempted to be a sect within Judaism, to follow the age-old church growth principle of “we want to grow, but only by adding more people who are exactly like us.”

It’s hard for us to blame them because chances are we have been them. And what God is up to in today’s Acts reading really is pretty radical. We can tell by the reaction people have when they hear what Peter has been doing. They’re scandalized that he has been hanging out with and especially eating with the wrong kind of folks. Most of this whole long reading is Peter recounting how God changed who he thought was included in “one another.” And the story convinces the very people who were scandalized only moments ago. Peter’s story tells how he went where he didn’t want to go, to meet people he didn’t really want to meet—and found God there already waiting for him. “Love one another just as I have loved you,” and the group included in “one another” is not only bigger than we want it to be, it is bigger than we can ever quite imagine it should be. Until, that is, we find ourselves in one of those places we don’t want to be and find that God is there, as God always will be.

I was struck this week by how strange life is these days. It feels like we’re simultaneously jaded and outraged all the time, and all the time the normal barrage of daily stuff and obligation just keeps coming. (I’m facebook friends with a lot of you, and so I know that all y’all are too busy.) It is strangely comforting to be reminded today that whether we are jaded or outraged, going through our oldest routine or improvising in situations we’ve never faced before, the foundation of Christian life remains the same. No easy kindness or surrendering wellness meditation, but the love we learned from Jesus Christ. The love that transforms lives, goes through the cross and the grave, and brings new life in the unlikeliest places. The love that is always calling us further out and deeper in, even to the places we do not want to go. Because God is waiting for us there. Amen.