

Fifth Sunday of Easter, C
Acts 11:1-18
Psalm 148
Revelation 21:1-6
John 13:31-35

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Jesus said, “Love one another.” As someone pointed out, these words are “ridiculously easy to understand and ridiculously hard to do.” (David Lose)

We’ve heard it all our lives: “Love one another.” But what does this powerful commandment say to us this particular morning, as live our faith in a culture where disrespect and contempt for others is always threatening to erupt in violence – especially toward those who are different, those who are vulnerable, those who are powerless. Immigrants, refugees, sexual minorities, people of color, women – all become targets.

Truthfully, this is the *perfect* time to hear Jesus say again, “Love one another.” Especially when we realize where and when Jesus first said it. Not on a mountain in the sunshine, not in a field of flowers or by a sparkling lake. Jesus spoke these words in an upstairs room where he shared one last supper with his friends before he went to the cross. And before Jesus ever said, “Love one another,” he showed them what he meant. Jesus washed the disciples’ feet the way a slave would. Jesus even washed the feet of Judas, who he knew was headed out to betray him. Think about that. “Love one another” meant loving Judas too.

Yes, I believe *that* kind of love is real and deep enough to speak to the concerns you and I are bringing to worship today. Obviously the love Jesus calls us to is not just about warm feelings or being nice. This love is resilient. It is realistic. It is courageous. This love knows danger and violence, and this love chooses to be itself, to *be love*, in the face of threats. This love chooses to never give in to hate. This love takes its commitment all the way to the cross, where the old ways of sin and death are destroyed.

Someone pointed out that Jesus’ last words to his friends could have been “Go out and die with me.” Or, “Keep the faith.” Or, “After I’m gone, go out and preach my message to the world.” But instead Jesus gave them this simple and challenging word: “Love one another.” Why? Because this kind of love is the hallmark not just of God and Jesus but also of the Christian church. (David Lose) Love is Christ’s signature written in our lives. Jesus says, “*By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if -- and when -- you show love to one another.*”

There’s no denying this calling can seem heavy and difficult. With the whole world watching, and people spewing hate all around us, we’re supposed to impress others with how brilliantly loving we Christians are? Often all we can think of is how we fall short. All we can remember is the harsh word we shouted in public yesterday, which strangers overheard.

But that’s not what this is about – Jesus is not laying an impossible burden on us. Jesus isn’t saying, you better love everyone perfectly, or else you’ll make all Christians look like fools.

Instead, Jesus is stating a simple truth: When people love the way Jesus loved, when people love in a manner that reflects God's realistic, resilient, courageous love for this world... people will notice. People will recognize this love for what it is: a little piece of God being shared. Love like this brings strength and hope to everyone.

I've seen love like this. You have too. We've all been changed by it. And we have all lived it.

I have a friend who was wounded as a child by relatives who had their own issues and problems. Because of this, love doesn't come easily for her. But even so, love is working to bring something good out of her hurtful past. A therapist is helping her understand herself better, and she's been working to reconnect with her parents and brothers and sisters. Oh, this is a difficult love to practice. A phone call, a letter, a short visit... sometimes it goes well, sometimes it doesn't. It's a very personal struggle, but divine love is definitely working in this honest, realistic, persistent love she is practicing, love that refuses to give in to bitterness. As I observe my friend patiently working this situation through, I know Jesus was right—when you see God's love changing things, you recognize it, you gain strength from it.

Loving one another doesn't have to be dramatic. You and I are loving one another every day.

I see love when people have a conflict and decide not just to turn their backs in anger, or hunker down with allies and spread rumors about the other person. Instead, they stay calm and call up their courage to try and understand that other one. Whether it's a spat at school or with a neighbor, or a conflict on the job, or a divorce situation, whenever people hang in there and try to understand each other, love is doing its work.

And love is complicated. The way forward is rarely clear cut. For example, love works in many different ways on a city sidewalk, when a homeless man asks for money. Love moves some people to give a dollar, or offer a meal ticket. Love moves some people to say, "No money today." Love moves some people to donate to homeless ministries, or learn about what puts people on the street. Love moves some people to simply meet the man's eyes and recognize him as a fellow human being. "Love one another" is not a simple formula. Love can say no, and "no" can be a compassionate and wise response. But love is always at work when we refuse to write anyone off, when we act out of the conviction that we are all God's children, when we keep our minds and hearts open and willing to connect and learn.

I see love working in parents. You know, parenthood does not always bring out the best in us. You may have experienced this. As the novelist Fay Weldon noted, "The greatest advantage of not having children is that you can go on believing you are a nice person: once you have children, you realize how wars start." (quoted by Harriet Lerner in *The Mother Dance*, p. 242—great book!) Being parents teaches us the way of resilient, realistic, courageous holy love.

You could say the same thing about marriage, or any family relationship. These are places where we get schooled in loving one another. I feel so strongly that learning to love in families is something that shapes us in a spiritual way. Practicing mature and patient love amid the

complexities of being a son or daughter, a brother or sister, mom or dad, wife or husband, this is divine love at work. Love is about staying connected with others, in beautiful times and ugly times. When people get sick. When addiction interferes. When aging brings difficult transitions. When hard decisions need to be made. In sickness and in health, for richer for poorer, till death us do part. That's the gift and challenge of family.

We are all practicing love—and you know, it's like practicing the piano. You don't get it right all the time. Almost nobody becomes a star at "loving one another." But, because love is important to us and to the world, because love is what we are about as Christ's people, we don't give up.

And of course Christians do not have a corner on showing divine love. I remember talking with some Muslims who started an interfaith dialogue after 9/11. They wanted to help people understand that the overwhelming majority of Muslims love God and love peace. Two men, a Christian and a Muslim, were invited to lead a discussion at a church. But when they got there it wasn't long before hate and fear and prejudice showed up too. Voices were raised, people verbally attacked them. It was a painful night. You could sense their disappointment, but you could also sense their resolve to keep practicing patient love – because they agreed to go out as a team to talk to another group two weeks later. That is resilient, determined, courageous love.

"Love one another" is not a safe calling. We don't get through the experience of loving unscathed. Jesus didn't either. But even from the cross, Jesus spoke forgiveness to the ones who put him there. And when hatred had done its absolute worst, when Jesus' broken body lay in a tomb, God raised Jesus from the dead to show that in actual fact, love is stronger than death. Love – not hate -- is the most powerful force in the universe. When we participate in love, we have a part in the power that moves the sun, moon, and stars. We have a part in the power that raises the dead to life and one day will complete the work of making this whole world new.

I invite you to let this world-changing love work in you today.

I invite you to think back to a time this past week when you chose love. Maybe you looked out for the interests of somebody else, or overlooked it when someone slighted you. Maybe you put aside your goals to help someone else achieve theirs. Maybe it was a large act of love, maybe it was small. But I know every one of us did in fact "love one another" this past week. Let's take a moment to reflect, remember, and lift this up to God.

Next, I invite you to recall a situation when you found it difficult to "love one another." Maybe you lost your temper. Maybe forgiveness was hard. Or you had trouble getting over it when someone disappointed you. Reflect for a moment. Lift that situation up to God, too.

This is the essence of God's love—in God's forgiveness and grace, we are able peacefully to bring both these realities before God, our successes and our falling short, to just lift them up, and let them be, and ask God – in mercy and love --to bless and lead us to grow in love.

My brothers and sisters, *this* is how we make our way in a world where violence is growing. We say: No. I don't stand for hate. I stand for love. I will never be perfect at "loving one another," but I've been claimed by God in love, I've been marked by the cross of love, and I belong to Christ forever. And with God's help I'll keep doing my best to walk in love's way.

It is no small thing. When we live this way, we beat back the darkness and make a space for new life. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said:

*Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that.
Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.*

And we belong to love. Thanks be to God. Amen.

(Special thanks to David Lose for his article, "On Loving—and Not Loving—One Another" 4/21/13 www.workingpreacher.com which suggested the format for this sermon. Check out this page for great Bible study and reflection on the weekly lectionary. Thank you, Dave!)