

Sermon for Easter 6 - John's Farewell Discourse

Today's gospel reading, like the one from last week and most of the next few weeks, come from John's Farewell Discourse. This is chapters 13-17 of St. John's Gospel and it is what Jesus said and did the night before he died. His last chance to teach the disciples. The Farewell Discourse has two main themes, I think. One theme is the one we read last week, that Jesus gives us a new commandment, to love one another, and he wants us to do that. The second theme is that, although Jesus is leaving us, he will not leave us abandoned but his Spirit will be within us and keep teaching us. These two themes St. John thought were so important that he hammered them home in this passage. So let's look at these themes.

We read last week that Jesus told his disciples he was giving them a new commandment, that they should love one another as he loved them. He said that was how people would know we were his disciples, if we loved one another. He repeats this several times in these chapters.

Now love is a tricky thing. Every human being naturally loves. Babies love. Unless a person has been very deeply damaged, they naturally love. Perhaps this is one of the ways that we are made in God's image. Because St. John tells us in his letters that God is love and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Loving, truly loving, is the best way we have of being united with God. And if we push all love out of our lives, we are also pushing God out, because God is love. So love is central to who we are and who we're meant to be.

But we use that word in a lot of ways. We say we love ice cream or we love the latest movie. That's a pretty trivial type of love. Although, I think the ability to delight in things is also part of our sharing of God's nature, because God certainly seems to delight in things. But I don't think this is quite what Jesus is requiring of us here.

We also talk about romantic love. This is much closer, at least, if it's actually love and not just a selfish desire to get what we want from the other person. But instead, the kind of romantic love that wants to care for the other person and be close to them, is more like what Jesus is talking about here. Or the love a parent has for a child or a friend has for a friend. The kind of love where you will put yourself out for the one you love. But this is also not quite it. Every human being (and actually some animals) are capable of this sort of love. Jesus didn't really need to make a special commandment about this.

What Jesus commands us is to love one another the way he loved us. And later on he specifies that there is no greater love than the willingness to lay down our lives for our friends. Which doesn't just mean dying for them, but also spending our lives for them. When Jesus tells us to love one another as he loved us, he has just washed his disciples' feet, the lowliest service. He is about to die for them. He is about to forgive them for abandoning him and betraying him and forgive his enemies, even as they are crucifying him. That's the kind of love he wants us to practice. Not just to love our neighbours who are nice and exchange favours, but to serve them and care for them and put ourselves well out for them. And to do this whether they are nice or a total pain. The way Jesus did.

Now that's a tall order. That is asking a LOT. We might be able to forgive someone who really hurts us long after the fact, if we really work at it. But Jesus forgave his enemies as they were still killing him. By the way, so did St. Stephen later on. You can read about that in Acts 7. So did a lot of the saints. But that sort of thing is really hard to do. Even loving our neighbours who have a barking dog is hard to do.

Jesus says that everyone will know we are his disciples if we love one another. In fact, that's the main way they'll have. Not just if we go to church or talk about the Lord a lot. But if we love one another. The way he loved us. And conversely, if we don't love each other, they'll know we're not very good disciples. Just this week someone told me her son didn't go to church anymore because last time he went everything seemed fine in the service but afterwards in the parking lot he heard them gossiping about each other and cutting each other up. He wanted no part of that.

So here's a story of the kind of love Jesus was talking about. In the 16th century, which is during the Reformation, there was an Anabaptist man named Dirk Willems. The Anabaptists are the spiritual ancestors of the Mennonites, the Brethren and the Baptists. But during the Reformation both the Catholic and Protestant churches were against them. They called them heretics because they believed in a strict separation of church and state and because they didn't practice infant baptism and they were pacifists.

Anyway, Dirk was in prison. He had been arrested for being an Anabaptist and he knew he faced torture and death. Ah, all the main churches practiced torture on heretics at that time. The idea was that they were heading for hell because of their beliefs so they should get a little foretaste of it which would maybe make them repent. It didn't tend to work, besides being pretty horrible. They said and believed they were being caring, doing it for the prisoner's own good. Which just goes to show even the church can persuade itself of anything it wants to do and justify it. But it doesn't actually make it right.

Well, Dirk escaped from prison in the winter and he was running away, pursued by a guard. He ran over a frozen river and looking back he saw that the guard had fallen through the ice while chasing him. He immediately turned back and pulled him out of the ice. By the time he got him onto dry land, the other guards caught up and they did indeed arrest him, torture him and kill him. That man believed in loving his enemies as Jesus loved us. That's what Jesus was talking about.

Well, that kind of love is very hard. It doesn't come naturally to us. Loving our babies and kittens and things comes very naturally. Loving our enemies does not. In fact, it's really, really hard. Well, actually, loving our friends and nearest and dearest can be hard some days! But we can usually muddle through that. But enemies? No.

Well, that's where the second theme comes in. Jesus was well aware that this went against all our instincts and all our social training. He knew it was hard. He knew it was hard because he did it and he found it hard. And he could do it because he was human but also divine, as John makes very clear in this passage. That kind of love is divine love, not ordinary human love. And the only way humans can practice it is with help from the divine.

Jesus tells his disciples in today's passage, "Those who love me will keep my word and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them." And he goes on to say, "The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you."

Jesus is promising that God, Father, Son, and Spirit, will come and make their home with us. They will dwell within us. And the Spirit will work within us to teach us how to do this stuff, how to follow Jesus, how to keep his commandments, how to love with divine love. And the Spirit will remind us and transform us into people who are able to love as God loves.

In the final analysis, that's what it means to be a Christian. It means following Jesus, inviting Jesus into our lives, trying hard to obey his commandments and walk in his ways. It means having the Spirit of God dwelling within us, helping us to grow into the full stature of Christ. In the end, being a Christian is not about being a good person, though we hope Christians will become good people. It's not even just about going to church, though Christians really do need to go to church. But we need to go to church to deepen our relationship with God in Christ. And with each other. So we can follow Jesus.

Jesus is inviting us into a relationship with God. He says today that God, Father, Son and Spirit, will come and dwell within us and guide us and direct us. Opening the doors of our hearts and souls to God through Jesus Christ is what it means to become a Christian. Living that out all our lives, trying to follow Jesus, trying to keep his commandments, with the help of the Spirit, is what it means to live as a Christian. And we can tell if it's really happening if we are growing in love all the time, for everyone.

And we need to do this together. We can't just love generally. We need to love people. Real people, not theoretical people. We in the church are all supposed to be practicing this and we're all trying hard. But it doesn't mean all of us find each other easy to live with or to love. Even though we are one Body in Christ, closer than siblings, we can still find this hard. We practice loving each other here in the church and then, as we get the rough edges worn off, we go out into the world together and love the world, too. We let Jesus love the world through us.

For us the good news is that Jesus will not abandon us in this process. He is not asking perfection of us. Remember the people he was talking to that last night abandoned him and ran away a couple hours later. And he forgave them and took them back and trusted them again. When we mess up, as we surely will, he will continue to work within us to transform us into more loving people, more able to share his love with the world. That's another reason we need the church to help us along the way: to pick us up when we fall, dust us off and put us on our feet again. And love us in the process.

Jesus knows all this. And he tells his disciples he is giving them peace. He tells them, "Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." Because he loves us. Because he is with us and remains within us. And he will see us through.