

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

Acts 8:26-40

Psalm 22:24-30

1 John 4:7-21

John 15:1-8

May 2, 2021

The Fifth Sunday of Easter

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It would be easy to fall into clichés this morning. Cliche's about love and goodness and grace. In fact, if you come to church on a regular basis, you have heard it all before. You know the phrases...Love your neighbor as yourself. Love and serve the Lord with all your heart, with all your mind and with all your strength. Love one another as Christ loved you. For God so loved the world. Jesus loves me this I know.

The concept of love has been the bedrock of our faith...it grounds how we think about Christ's sacrifice on the cross. It is the foundation of God's desire to be among us. To redeem us from sin and provide for us everlasting life. This kind of love is far beyond anything we can even imagine. It is by all accounts remarkable.

Yet, love is a word we toss around so much in life and in faith that I fear we have gotten a little desensitized to the power of what it truly means. Not just for our hearts but for our faith, for our relationships, and for our communities.

I was struck by how many times our texts for today use the word love. Take a look at 1 John. If you read it aloud, it kind of sounds like a parent speaking to a toddler. Don't touch that. Put that down. Watch where you are going. If I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times. It's the broken record of trying to get someone's attention, to teach them, to keep them safe from harm, to learn right from wrong.

And, so, 1 John repeats the lesson of love over and over so that we start to grab hold. Here are some of the well-worn phrases...Love one another. Love is from God. God is love. God's love is perfect. We love because God first loved us.

In fact, "love" is used 27 times in this short passage. 27 times. A bit redundant but apparently very necessary. For context, the author of 1 John was writing to a community in conflict, a community that was trying to define itself as followers of Christ but some among them had started to distort Christ's teachings and question the nature of Christ's life and his death.

In the midst of these rumblings and division, the author of 1 John drives home this critical point...one cannot truly believe in Jesus without truly and self-lessly loving others. Love is grounded in belief and belief is grounded in self-less action.

The love 1 John is talking about in our text is agape love. A love that is meant to convey brotherly love and affection. It's a solid, grounded love that unifies and builds relationships among people. Martin Luther King, Jr. described agape love as something that is understanding

and creative and becomes a source of redemptive goodwill for all people. *Redemptive goodwill for all people.*

Sounds nice, doesn't it? But, that's where we have to be careful not to fall into old clichés. It's easy to say of course, I have goodwill for those around me. It's easy to pat ourselves on the back and say, of course I have done what is right and what is good. I have loved so well. But, have we?

Because...have you ever tried to have goodwill for someone you are in conflict with? Have you ever tried to deeply love (agape love) someone you really, really dislike? Where division has become a deep chasm...where suspicion, jealousy, and anger have split any hope for reconciliation straight down the middle? Where any hope of mending what has been broken seems completely lost? Do we love well in those moments?

In those instances, you can't just talk about love as a cliché. You can't just pat yourself on the back. You can't just give it surface treatment and throw around nice sounding quotes about love. You have to utilize love in a way that bears radical change and humility, love that reaches into the depths of our divisions, love that courageously offers forgiveness and compassion, love that lets go of fear, love that says Christ is embodied within us and because we believe in Jesus Christ we can do no less than to truly and self-lessly love one another.

Now, these lessons are nothing new. So instead of just repeating them to you like the author of 1 John, let me ask you this...how is this call to love changing you? How is it changing your relationships? How is it changing the world?

Sherri Brown, Associate Professor of New Testament, states that this kind of embodied love means that, "Every time we step beyond where we'd rather be, what we'd rather do, into what might embarrass or negatively impact us in order to share God's love, we answer this call."

We answer the call to love even when it is difficult. That means dealing with conflict the way Jesus dealt with conflict. Listening to others the way Jesus listened. Being courageous the way Jesus was courageous. And yes, sometimes that might be a little embarrassing...somebody might not understand or agree with your actions. Somebody might even make fun of you, call you naïve for loving so self-lessly. And yes, it may feel at times as though you have something to lose especially if we are too caught up in things like money and power and status or when we fear that following Christ might risk our social, political, or professional position. Loving one another isn't always easy.

There is one more word I want us to look at this morning that is repeated over and over again in our readings about love. It's the word *abide*. *Abide*, as it is used in our texts, conveys the act of continually being present with someone. It's a presence that is unified, intertwined, full of redemptive goodwill for one another.

*Abide* is critical to understanding agape love. Love cannot be fully expressed without this kind of unified presence. It isn't just talk. It isn't just surface gestures. It's a commitment to abide with one another...to walk through life together, joined as one body, one community, one family.

When we *abide* with one another we start to build the kind of community that God was trying to build. A unified, self-less, compassionate community. A bold, heartfelt, and just community. It's this kind of embodied love that erases prejudice, offers forgiveness, heals the wounded, stands up to pain, fights for justice. It's the kind of love that steps out and acts.

Now...Let me ask you again... how is this call to love changing you? How is it changing your relationships? How is it changing the world?

Amen.