

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

John 13:31-35

Acts 11:1-18

Psalm 148

Revelation 21:1-6

May 15, 2022

The Fifth Sunday of Easter

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G.K Chesterton once wrote in his treatise *"What's Wrong with the World"* that, "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried."

It has been found difficult and left untried. This Sunday's texts give us pause to reflect on what Chesterton refers to as the Christian ideal. Some might say these texts are a reflection on the "merits" of Christian love. But, I would suggest that thinking about the ideal of Christian love in terms of its merits is far too simplistic and not quite on point. The more accurate reflection we are called to do this Sunday is to reflect on the *commandment* to love.

*Commandment* defined as an order, command or charge. It is the way things are to be done. Full stop. Not just an idea of the things we should do or the things we can choose to do. But...the things we are told to do.

As one commentator states the commandment we are given to love one another is witnessed by a new life in Christ that we are called to embody. A new life that not only makes the commandment central to our lives and to how we treat one another but a new life that also demonstrates through our very being the nature of God.

In other words, the commandment we are given is to embody the nature of God to one another. Be God hands and heart...unconditionally. *"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."* Just as Jesus loved us. And...who did Jesus love? Everyone.

That's the ideal. And it has indeed not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried.

Let's be very candid. Love, in the form Jesus teaches isn't all that appealing. I mean, it's good, when we are on the receiving end. We like to receive that kind of gracious love. But, I can't say that we like to give it all that much. To be fair, we like to give it when it's easy and convenient, when it doesn't challenge us too much, when we can give it to someone we like. Easy love is just that...easy.

But, that's not the kind of love Jesus is talking about. Consider the night he is teaching his disciples this very lesson. Remember what has just transpired. As Jesus is washing his disciples' feet, as he is breaking bread with them, he knows that he is about to be arrested. He knows Judas is about to betray him. He knows Peter is about to deny him. And his response even with this painful knowledge is to love them anyway.

Jesus cares for them. That's not easy love. Jesus doesn't show bitterness or anger or resentment. He doesn't hold a grudge or talk bad about them. He doesn't ignore them or put them down. He washes their feet and feeds them.

Could we do the same?

In our Gospel, Jesus is teaching what hard love looks like. And this kind of love is humble and radically kind. It's self-giving and honest. It's redemptive and forgiving. Here's what else I find interesting about this kind of love...it's also very, very bold and courageous. Think about it...how has it felt when you have been hurt or when you have done the hurting? How does it feel to love in those circumstances? I'm talking about the times when showing love is risky and might come at some cost. Could we be bold like Jesus in those moments?

Now...here is something important to note about hard love...Jesus doesn't *ignore* what Judas and Peter are about to do. He doesn't pretend it's OK. Jesus states very clearly that one of his own will betray him. He calls it out. And he tells Peter straight up that Peter will deny him. He says...these are the things you are going to do and by naming the harmful actions he shines a light on the wrongdoing. But, Jesus doesn't stop with naming the harm. He moves beyond it and shows them another way to be in relationship with one another. He shows them a way that is so much stronger than their weakness. A way that is grounded in hard, courageous love...a love that changes things.

Put yourself at the table with Jesus that night. Reaching out to his friends, some of whom would show no respect for the friendship that they shared, no respect for the community that they had been building, no respect for the hope that they had been preaching. I don't know about you, but I would feel utterly defeated and rejected if I had been Jesus. I would want to walk out of the room, turn a table or two, or talk bad about Judas and Peter, call them names.

Because, if I hold that grudge, or seek revenge or withhold love, I might just feel a little bit better. And I might make Judas and Peter feel guilty and shameful.

But the truth is, you never feel better. Retaliation and vengeance and emotional or physical harm only dig the pain deeper. For everyone. You never heal.

This is why Jesus gets down on his knees and washes the disciples' feet. It's why he breaks the bread and serves the wine. He could have turned that table into a place of deeper pain but instead he turns it into a place of love. And he teaches...this is what you are to do. Without limits. Without conditions. Without fear.

Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber says if we aren't open to this kind of difficult, hard love we will inevitably end up building barriers to redemption and grace. It begs the question...What barriers have you put up to living this new commandment?

Really name your barriers. Because when we turn away from the real work of hard love and leave it untried we miss the opportunity to allow God into those cracks of our brokenness, disappointment, abuse and pain. Weber points out that it's within those cracks, the cracks deep within our hearts that God is just waiting to come in and fill. And...that loving action is simply too beautiful to miss.

I read this great statement about our Gospel that said, "At its best, "new commandment" love is humble enough to kneel and wash, to "take the form of a servant" — and at the same time, bold enough to protect and connect, overturn conventions, and let the surprising, beautiful glory of God shine through. Humble and bold, ordinary and radiant, reconciling the world, stitch by stitch. *By this love, Jesus says, the love that remakes the world, everyone will know that you are my disciples.*"

The love that remakes the word. The love that remakes relationships. The love that remakes communities and families and friends.

This is the Christian ideal. This is the new commandment.

Thanks be to God. Amen.