

5th Sunday of Easter - John 13:31-33a,34-35

You have probably heard this question before, but it's a question worth meditating on regularly. What if you were told that you had 24 hours to live? How would you spend those hours? Would there be some place you feel you needed to go? What would you do? Who would you do it with?

Looking at life from this perspective, it is amazing how many things that we think are necessary, how many fears that absorb our time, suddenly seem trivial and unimportant.

I think most of us would clear our calendars and delete many marginal people from our appointment books. We would try to surround ourselves with the few precious people in our lives and engage in a number of relatively simple things: crying, laughing, and perhaps sharing a meal.

But one thing would be clear. In those final hours we would know what we would say. Because in those circumstances there is only one thing to say which makes any sense.

This can be documented by the events of 9/11. During those terrible hours many people who were on the fatal hijacked airplane or who were isolated in the upper floors of the World Trade Center had cell phones.

They used those cell phones, and we have records of those calls. The records that would break your heart. Nobody with those cell phones chose to call their financial planner. No one called the sports hotline to check on recent scores. They **all** called the person that meant the most to them, and they **all** said the same three words: "I love you."

Now why is it that those three words are the words that everyone says in such circumstances? Certainly it is not a matter of providing information. The people who received those calls already knew that they were loved.

No, those words were spoken because in the presence of death we reach out intuitively to what is most important in our lives. What is the most important thing are the relationships we have with the people who we love.

Somehow saying those words makes love present, makes love tangible, gives us something to hold on to as life slips away.

The words “I love you” are a sacrament, if you will. They make the spiritual present, the invisible real. In the last few moments of life the only thing that matters is our connection with others. When we face the reality of death, all we want is love.

So, if this is the case, does it not make sense to take what is most important and make it the foundation of our lives? This is what Jesus does in today’s gospel. In the last hours of His life He gives His disciples a new commandment. They must love one another.

In order to show them how to live out that commandment, Jesus, on the night before He died, gives us two gifts: a meal and an example. The meal is the meal of the Eucharist, the feast of love, the meal in which we celebrate God’s love for us and our love for one another.

The example is Jesus washing the feet of His disciples, the work of love, the action of service to the people we care for. To be a disciple of Jesus, then, is to be someone who knows the meaning of the meal and the meaning of the example.

A follower of Christ knows how important it is to celebrate love and to work for love.

How do we celebrate love? We celebrate love by always appreciating who are the key people in our lives, by not taking them for granted, by regularly using the words “I love you” as a sacramental moment, making present that which is so fundamental to our lives.

How do we work for love? By taking concrete steps to see that our relationships continue and grow, by learning how to speak the truth with the people that are connected to us, by listening to them, by saying “I’m sorry,” by asking “What do you need?” and then trying to make it real.

If we are going to be disciples of Jesus, if we are going to follow the commandment of love, we must celebrate love and work to deepen the relationships in our lives.

The good news, of course, is that most of us here today have more than 24 hours to live. Hopefully we have many more years. But how foolish would it be to postpone the action of love until those final hours.

Now is the time to celebrate the love of those who are in our lives. Now is the time to work to deepen and build those relationships. Today is the day that we should love one another as Christ has loved us. AMEN.

Love as Power

May 6, 2007

John 13:1, 31-33a, 34-35

Usually when we think of the word “love,” we think of romance, of hearts and flowers. But love is more than warm affection and sensual intimacy. There is a larger meaning to love which is revealed in today’s gospel. For in the gospel Jesus gives a new commandment: we are to love one another as he has loved us.

So how has Jesus loved us? With warm affection? Of course. But more than that, Jesus has loved us with action. Jesus has laid down his life for our salvation. In this action of sacrifice, in this action of love, God has raised him up and made him the head of a new creation. In Jesus’ active love, the reign of God has begun in our midst. Evil is being destroyed. God’s will is being established among us. So in Jesus, love is more than kind regards. Love is action. Love is more than amorous feelings. Love is power, the power to change the earth.

Love is power. In fact, there is no other power on earth for good stronger than love. It is love that calls tired parents out of their bed to care for a sick child. It is love that motivates a hospice worker to be present to a dying woman. It is love that leads a young man or woman to give two years of their life in the Peace Corps, serving in an inner city or a third world country. It is love that animates thousands of soup kitchens and homeless shelters and AIDS hospices. Love is a father or mother working two jobs to feed their children and pay the rent. Love is the choice to forgive an enemy or to sacrifice for peace.

Love is what makes the real heroes of our world: a young man or woman who could work in a prestigious law firm but chooses instead to work among the poor; a firefighter willing to rush into the World Trade Tower and rescue screaming victims. There is no force for good greater in our world than the power of love.

But we do not have enough of it. For all the love that there is, there is still not enough to bring about God’s kingdom. For some reason, we think that we should hold on to love, to preserve it. But love only has power when we let it go and let it flow out. It is then that it can make its effect upon others in our midst. For some reason, we think we should limit love to only certain groups, to our family and friends, to those who think and act like us, to those who we know and with whom we are familiar. But if we are to love as Jesus has loved us, we must push beyond the limits which we place on love. For who did Jesus love? For whom did Jesus give his life? Jesus did not give his life only for his mother and his disciples, only for the Jews and the poor, only for those who were gay or educated, only for those who were black or those who were good. Jesus gave his life for everyone, for all of humanity. If we are to love as he loved us, then we must love in a way which is wider and deeper than the way to which we are inclined. We must push beyond whatever limits we place on love and join

ourselves with others who love, so that God's kingdom might be built up, so that we might participate in recreating the earth.

This truth is expressed most beautifully by the Jesuit theologian Teilhard deChardin. Over fifty years ago he wrote, "Some day, after we have mastered the winds and the waves, the tides and gravity, we shall harness for God the energies of love. And then for the second time in the history of the world, humans will have discovered fire." We need that fire, the fire of love. We need that power, the power to unite rather than divide, to build up rather than destroy, to heal rather than attack, the power to work for justice rather than to feed off greed. We need the power of love. We can release it, if we love as Jesus has loved us.

Creation and New Creation

May 2, 2010

Revelation 21:1-5a

The first book of the bible is the book of Genesis, and the first story in the book of Genesis is the great story of creation where God makes all things in seven days. The last book in the bible is the book of Revelation, and the last great scene in the book of Revelation is today's second reading. In it the seer John beholds a new heaven and a new earth. This is an image of a new creation where evil is eliminated, where there is no more death or crying or mourning or pain. These two stories in the Book of Genesis and the Book of Revelation frame the bible with creation and a new creation. This framing tells us something very important about God. But if we are going to understand that that truth, we must first understand in what sense is the new creation new.

The new creation is not new in the sense that God is giving us another creation, an alternate creation. It is new in the sense that God takes this creation, the original creation, and transforms it and purifies it. The story then is a story of God's faithfulness to what God has made. This is what we learn about God from the frame that holds the bible together. God does not give up on what God begins. Since God has made all things, God remains faithful to all things. God is committed to transform to this material world and will make all that is in perfect conformity to God's will.

This is why Christians believe in the resurrection of the body. We say that every time we say the Apostles' Creed. "I believe in the resurrection of the body and life everlasting. Amen." Why is the resurrection of the body so important? Because God made us with a body. A body is who we are. If God made our bodies, then our bodies are not incidental or disposable. We of course believe that when we die our souls will go to heaven with God. But that union with God in heaven is not our final condition. We are more than just souls. We believe that on the last day God will raise up our bodies which will be transformed into glorious resurrected bodies. We believe the same thing is true about the rest of creation. In some sense all that is, all plants and animals, all seas and oceans, will be transformed by God's power, to be a part of the new kingdom of God which Christ will bring about at his return.

Now what this new creation will be like we cannot imagine—no more than we can imagine the action that inaugurated the original creation. Both the book of Genesis and the book of Revelation use images that try to express the inexpressible. But those images cannot be taken literally. Otherwise we will make the mistake of trying to squeeze the action of creation into seven days or imagining how a new Jerusalem can come down from the heavens. But the bible uses these images to assert that the same God who created all things remains faithful to all things. We believe that God will not abandon our material creation or us as part of creation, but will transform all things into the Kingdom of God.

If we can accept this vision that Genesis and Revelation form around the bible, it can change the way that we live. If our world, if this creation, is not only made by God but has a future and is moving towards a new creation, then everything in our material world has value and should be respected. This is why Christians commit themselves to care for the earth, to protect the environment. Not because it is some passing political fad, but because we believe that this world is God's creation and will someday be glorified. Christians respect their bodies. We strive to be healthy, to exercise, to embrace our sexuality. We do this not because we are vain, but because we know that our bodies are God's creation and that someday they will raise up from the grave like Christ's resurrected body.

Christians are committed to protect life: life in the womb, life of the aged, the lives of the poor and of immigrants. We do this because we believe that all living things are God's creation and have a future in the kingdom that is to come.

Our God rejoices and values all that has been made. So should we. Our God protects and encourages all that lives. So should we. Our God fights evil and promises that someday evil will be destroyed. So should we.

What Kind of Love Is This?

April 28, 2013

John 13:31-33a, 34-35

Today's Gospel is a sleeper. When we first hear the words of Jesus, they seem warm and comforting. But when we probe them more deeply they turn out to be a dramatic challenge. Jesus' command to love one another at first seems a gentle and nurturing directive. But it is, in fact, a revolutionary expectation that can surprise us and, perhaps, anger us.

The command to love one another seems to capture a universal ideal with which all would agree. Who could be against love? Outside of a few tyrants and misanthropes, who would deny that love is what we want and loving is what makes life worth living? So we initially imagine Jesus' command as an expression of a belief found in every culture and time. We all agree that we are at our best when we love family, friends, and country, when we love one another.

But there are two phrases in today's gospel that betray this surface interpretation and pull us down into much deeper waters. The first is Jesus' comment, "By this all will know that you are my disciples." Jesus seems to be saying that there is something in our loving which will set us apart, something that will make us different. But how can this be, if loving is what everybody is doing? Clearly, Jesus' words reveal that he has a specific kind of love in mind, a love which is other than the love on which everyone agrees, a love which makes us distinctive.

This leads to the second phrase. The gospel tells us that Jesus gives this new commandment "when Judas had left them." The commandment to love is given in the context of betrayal. Even as Jesus knows that Judas is on his way to hand him over, Jesus commands his disciples to love one another. And he doesn't add, "Love one another *except for Judas.*"

Now it becomes clear that the kind of love Jesus commands goes beyond the love that everyone accepts, beyond the love of family, friends, and country. Jesus is asking us to love our betrayer. Jesus is asking us to love our enemy. Everyone would agree that it is a beautiful thing when you love the people who love you. Jesus is asking us to love the people who do not love us, to love the people who have hurt us. This is not an easy thing to do. It does, however, get attention.

Sean O'Malley, the Cardinal Archbishop of Boston, created quite a stir last week when he told reporters that, as a Catholic, he could not support the death penalty for the surviving perpetrator of the Boston bombings. The Cardinal said, "We have ways of punishing people and of protecting society which do not involve killing those who have offended us." The cardinal was expressing a belief in the value of all life, a love of all life. As Catholics, we love life—the innocent life within the womb, the guilty life of the criminal. He concluded by saying, "We must build a civilization of love or we will have no civilization at all."

The love that Cardinal O'Malley was speaking about is not the love that everyone accepts. It is the love that Jesus commanded. It is the love for our enemy, the love for someone who has hurt us.

So do not become comfortable with Jesus' command to love one another. It is a disturbing, countercultural command that asks us to show mercy to those who are guilty, to show respect to those who have hurt us, to refuse to do violence to those who have done violence to us. Speaking this kind of love in our society, would appear strange to some and nonsense to others. Many would ignore us or reject us for promoting it. But this much is sure. Were we to love in this way, were we to love as Jesus commands us, no one could doubt that we are his disciples.

A New Commandment

April 24, 2016

John 13:31-33a, 34-35

In the gospel we have just heard, Jesus gives us a new commandment to love one another. But how is this commandment new? Earlier in his ministry a lawyer came up to Jesus and asked, “What is the greatest commandment?” Jesus responded, “It is to love God with all your heart and to love your neighbor as yourself.” This is a great love commandment. In what way, then, does today’s new love commandment move beyond the earlier love commandment? It differs because Jesus uses himself as the model of love. He says, “Love one another as I have loved you.” If Jesus is the model for loving, then the stakes of loving are raised much higher, because Jesus loved selflessly, and completely and universally.

What Jesus is asking us to do in his new commandment is to love in a way that goes beyond normal human loving. Most of us try to love the people in our lives who deserve our love. But Jesus loved people who did not deserve his love. He loved Peter who denied him. He loved the criminal who hung on the cross next to him. He loved the woman who was caught in adultery. Most of us in our lives try to forgive people if they are sorry and if they ask for our forgiveness, but Jesus forgave those who crucified him even as they drove the nails through his hands and his feet. I think all of us try to love the people who belong to us: our children, our family and our friends. But Jesus loved the tax collector, the leper, and the prostitute.

It is not easy to follow Jesus’ new commandment of love because to love as Jesus loved is to adopt a love that is deep, radical and extreme. I think our first response to Jesus’ new command is frustration. How can anyone love this way? It is impractical. It is impossible. But the truth about Jesus’ new commandment is this: It is not only a demand. It is a gift. To love as Jesus loved is to do something that we cannot do on our own, by our own will power. Whenever we are able to love as Jesus loved, we know that it is through God’s grace. When we are able to forgive an enemy, to reach out and touch a leper, to show graciousness to those who do not deserve it, we know that God is working in us and through us. That makes us both humble and blessed.

To love as Jesus loved is not easy, but it is a love that lasts. I believe that when we come to the end of our life and look back over the things we have done and the people we have become, it will be the times we have love as Jesus loved that we will remember.

I believe that all people of good will should be able to say on their death bed, “I loved my children, I was faithful to my friends, I was fair to people who were fair to me.” To say those things is to admit that you have lived your life as a good moral person. But my hope is that many of us here will be able to say more than that when our lives comes to an end. When we look back on the things we have done, my hope is that we will be able to remember when we forgave someone who hurt us deeply, when we made a difference in the life of someone we barely knew, when we showed mercy to those who have no right to expect it. To remember such actions is to recognize that we loved as Jesus loved and God worked through us. Such actions should give us peace and joy, because they would indicate that we lived our lives not simply just as good moral people but as disciples of Jesus.

Loving Like Jesus

May 19, 2019

John 13:31-33a, 34-35

The phone rang for the sixth time in less than an hour. Leslie knew who was calling. It was her mother—again. Leslie was having a difficult day. Her five-year-old daughter, Emma, had been a handful from the moment she woke up. And now another call from Mom. About a year ago, a stroke took control of her mother's brain, leaving her dogged with paranoia and dementia. Every time her mother called, it was a challenge: the same conversation over and over again, the same reassurance that her mother would not be evicted from her apartment, the same insistence that she had just seen her mother the day before. For the first five times Leslie was able to hold it together. But when she picked up the phone for the sixth time, her patience abandoned her. She ended up yelling at her mother, or at the woman who once was her mother. Then she flopped on the couch, angry at herself for doing so.

It was then that her five-year-old daughter, Emma, came over. "Mommy," she said. "I want to talk to Grandma Ellie." So Leslie put her on speaker. "Grandma, It's Emma."

"Oh, darling," said Grandma. "How nice to hear you. How are you doing today? Did you go to school today?"

"Yes," she said. "It was share day and I brought my Wonder Woman bracelets."

"I bet that was amazing," Grandma said. "Everyone was certainly impressed. When will I see you again?"

Emma said, "This Sunday we are taking you to the carousel, and I am going to ride on the frog, and you can ride next to me on the horse."

"Oh," said Grandma. "That would make me very happy. I would have a lot of fun. But tell me, did you go to school today?" Grandma had just asked this, but Emma did not skip a beat.

"Yes," she said. "It was share day and I brought my Wonder Woman bracelets."

"How amazing," said Grandma. "I bet you were the hit of the class!"

Leslie listened in disbelief as her five-year-old daughter handled her fragile grandmother with ease. Then Leslie realized that she had been spending so much time wishing that Emma had a real grandmother, that Emma would have known the woman who was once her grandmother, that she had not noticed that Emma did have a real grandmother and a real relationship with her. Emma was able to love her grandmother the way that she was, and not as Leslie wished her to be. When the phone conversation ended, Leslie held her daughter tightly. She was only five years old, but that day she showed her mother how to answer the phone as a grown up.

In today's gospel Jesus asks us to love one another as he has loved us. And Jesus loves us the way that we are. He loves us with all of our faults and shortcomings. He loves us with all of our sins and prejudices. Even though all of us could be better people, Jesus does not

postpone his love until we improve. He finds the goodness in us and loves us today, and then he asks us to love one another in the same way.

He asks us to love our spouse as the person he or she is, giving love today even though we wish that our spouse would be more confident or more sensitive. He asks us to love our children as the people they have become, reaching out to them in love even though we might wish that they worked harder or made better decisions. He asks us to love our friends with all their faults, accepting them even though often they are late and sometimes their stories go on much too long.

It would be easy to love people if they met our expectations, if they were the people we wanted them to be. But real love finds a goodness in the way that people are and loves them accordingly. To love in this way not only enables us to answer the phone as a grownup. It also shows that we are loving one another as Jesus has loved us.

A New Heaven and a New Earth

May 15, 2022

Rev 21:1-5a

Easter is more than getting Jesus out of the tomb. Easter is more than getting us to heaven. Easter is about a new heaven and a new earth. This is what today's second reading from the Book of Revelation tells us. It insists that through Jesus' resurrection God has begun a new order of things and that God is moving us all to a new earth, a world in which every tear will be wiped away, where death and mourning, wailing, and pain will be no more. This is a startling statement. And the question we need to ask ourselves today is do we believe it.

Do we believe that our world could come to be a place where evil no longer exists, a place where pain and suffering could no longer be found? That is a big pill to swallow. I think most of us would on our best days be willing to say that the earth could become a better place, a bit more just, somewhat more peaceful. But a perfect place? That may be a bridge too far. Yet our scriptures and our faith insist that a perfect world is exactly what God has in mind, that God intends to make this world free from pain, evil, and death. Jesus' resurrection is the sign of God's intention, because if one person could conquer death, then it is possible that death could be conquered for us all. This then is our faith, a new heaven and a new earth, the belief that through God's power and our efforts our world can be transformed, can be made perfect.

And it is the intention of this homily to dare you to believe it, because if we could claim Easter and believe that evil could be eliminated, it would make it more likely that we would dedicate ourselves to the defeat of evil. If we could claim Easter and believe that this world could be perfected, it would make it more likely that we will find the energy and the wisdom to attain that perfection. Even though there is war in Ukraine, those who believe the promise of Easter refuse to give up on peace—no matter how unreasonable or unlikely that might seem—and continue to work to find ways to eliminate political aggression in the future.

Even though our environment is threatened by thousands of political and economic interests, those who believe in Easter continue to work to protect our planet even if at times their efforts seem futile. Even if your life has been devastated by the end of a relationship through divorce or death, those who believe in Easter continue to move forward in the hope that the future is not simply about surviving but living fully alive again.

Now, of course, we cannot do any of this on our own. We need God's help. But God is with us. God is committed to transform and to perfect this world. God says in today's second reading, "Behold, I make all things new." Dare to believe it.