

May 19, 2019

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Even if you don't read the Bible much, in today's Gospel Jesus says something that sounds like something Jesus would say. He gives his disciples a "new commandment." They [we] are to love one another as he has loved them [us]. And we know that he's talking to us through them. Not only are they to love one another, but *we* are supposed to love one another. And I have to say, quite honestly, that it would have probably been easier if he had asked us to do *anything* other than this. Had Jesus's commandment been anything – give 10% of your money to the church, *go* to church, feed the poor, be nice to children and dogs – *anything* would have been easier. And honestly, the reason anything would have been easier is because anything would have left us in control of the situation.

Perhaps part of the challenge in all of this is our attempt to understand what it means to love. There's a lot of conversation about love in the Bible, but it always – to me – feels like we really don't grasp what God is trying to say. Let me give you an example. In the first parish there was a member who was deeply manipulative, had been for years. People talked about it. At a congregational meeting in a moment where something was going to happen, he didn't approve of, he immediately jumped up and said that church was about loving one another. All that was being proposed was allowing a few other people apart from his daughter take a more active role in Sunday School. But in this, love is an emotion and emotions are manipulative [and can be manipulated].

I don't think Jesus is aiming us in this direction. When Jesus talks about love, it doesn't seem that he's aiming at emotion, but something far deeper. He says that he loves his disciples, and he talks about loving those who are left out in the world. He loves all of these deeply flawed people – his disciples, the tax collectors and prostitutes [quintessential outsiders], the sick, and there is good evidence he loves the rich people and the pharisees as well. Clearly, Jesus has emotion, but there is something far deeper that is going on. When you read through the stories, Jesus seems to be saying that the tax collector is more than a tax collector and the prostitute is more than a prostitute and a poor person is more than a poor person and a rich person is more than a rich person and a fisherman is more than a fisherman.

We do a good job at categorizing people, seeing them in a simply functional way. And, admittedly, we tend to think of ourselves that way. We define ourselves in terms of

our jobs and our homes and our savings accounts [or the lack of these things...]. We define our parenting in relationship to the success of our children and what they accomplish. We see people in terms of rich and poor, men or women, citizens or immigrant. I have feelings about you, about what you may or may not do for me, and that's easy. But to love you, I need to work to discover your humanity.

Allow me to give you a little example. When we started actively working with poor people who came to our Church, one concern was the stories people sometimes tell us. They can be spectacular and defy plausibility. And some of us talked about that. And my feeling has turned toward the notion that we make people tell us crazy stories so we help them. But people tell these stories because they're trying to survive, to feed their families. Our job is to try to discover their humanity. For them and for us. And when we approach people this way, we don't necessarily *give* people *more* things, but we do begin to see each other as humans. Broken and full of contradictions. And seeing this, we become more than we imagined. We become, should we say, loved.

A couple of weeks back, I made reference to the Gospel story of the Good Samaritan and we talked about the beginning of the story. The story begins with someone wanting to know what it means to love God and love our neighbor. And at the end of the story, being a neighbor, loving someone, found its root in showing mercy, which is something deeply different than a feeling. It is a discovery of someone else's, as well as our own, deep and buried humanity.

In helping others discover themselves as humans loved by God, loved by Jesus, is to be the gold-standard of what it means to be the disciples of Jesus. And when we do this, we just may discover ourselves and our humanity as well.

Peace be with you.

Amen.

Pastor Erdos

Easter 5

John 13:31-35