

Fifth Sunday of Easter

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Introduction

In the past few years, it has become commonplace to take a break from social media. Once used as a tool for socialising and communication, social media has also become a place for building and nurturing business relationships without the limit of office hours. The constant onslaught of work sits alongside an ongoing feed of depressing news and online confrontation, and can take its toll on our mental health and wellbeing. Everything is immediate and available; we risk being stretched to our limits if we do not put into practice healthy boundaries. I acknowledge that as I get older, I find myself craving telephones with fixed lines, computers that you cannot carry around and offices with doors. I do not want to be available 24/7, especially as I exhort the observance of one's own personal sabbath. We need to be able to find the rest and the joy in stepping out of the everyday.

If competition is our everyday, then how do we counterbalance it? Into this context comes Jesus' commandment that we should love one another. What if the greatest conflict we experience is that we believe that we are in competition with one another, when in fact we should simply love one another?

The context of today's text is crucial to understanding the depth of its teaching. The disciples are sitting with Jesus at the dinner table, the meal we know as the Last Supper. Jesus has showed his humility in service by washing the feet of the disciples. He has shown them that their notion of a power relationship should be turned on its head: all, particularly those who lead, are called to care for and serve one another. Jesus then reveals that one of the disciples is about to betray him. Shocked and hurt, those gathered around the table cannot believe that this is true. Surely, they all trusted and followed Jesus and believed in him. Yet Judas gets up from the table and leaves. The disciples are thrown into flux, having their understandings of the world turned upside down. To lead is to serve. Trust can be broken. What would happen next?

As you read the text, I invite you to reflect upon the power of Jesus' words following the revelation of Judas' betrayal. Jesus does not teach retaliation or anger. Instead, he preaches love.

Text

When he had gone out, Jesus said, 'Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, "Where I am going, you cannot come." I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'

Comment

'Love one another.' It is the simplest commandment, yet surely the most difficult. Everything in our fast-paced, results-driven world suggests that wealth, power and recognition are the goals for which we should strive. The expectation is that we will receive more for less, even if this means stomping on others to achieve it. Into this arena of competition and greed, Jesus speaks love.

At various times during the Covid-19 pandemic, we have had to live restricted lives. Particularly during the lockdowns, our contemporary decalogue included such commandments as: Thou shalt not leave thy house unless absolutely necessary. Thou shalt not enter the grocery shop without first sanitising thy hands. Thou shalt not use public transport without wearing a face covering. Thou shalt not mix with more than three other households. Thou shalt not use hymnbooks in church. Thou shalt not see a doctor, nor shall a doctor see thou, but thou might speak with a doctor on the telephone. Into a world and a society of 'shalt nots,' Jesus speaks love. He commands us to love one another by caring for ourselves and for others. In so doing, he turns the world upside down.

Jesus challenges us to understand love differently. Our text follows the moment when the betrayal of Jesus at the hands of Judas is revealed. In our current context, I wonder how we might expect the conversation at the table to continue. Would there be words of vengeance and retaliation? Would there be emotional words like disappointment and hurt? Would there follow a qualified exhortation to care for one another but only those we like and with whom we agree? This is not what Jesus says. There is no limitation to the command he gives to love one another. He does not ask the disciples to love each other but not Judas. He simply calls them to love as he does.

After this teaching, Jesus tells Simon Peter that he will deny his master three times. Still his message is that love is the law. Through betrayal and denial, Jesus loves. Jesus knows that love is not easy. At times it is particularly difficult to achieve, but this is the goal for which we should strive. We should love one another.

As I write this, I am preparing to officiate at my third wedding of the week, which is an absolute joy. During my conversations with the couples in the lead up to their big days, we have many discussions about what love is. Love is not the wedding day being perfect. Love is not finding 'the' dress or coordinating the ties of the groomsmen with the dresses of the bridesmaids. Love is not hearts and flowers. Love is not a Hallmark card or film (other greetings cards and movies are available!). Love is hard work. Love is making the effort, when others might walk away. Love is forgiveness. Love is listening properly, even when we are tired, busy or distracted. Love is taking the time to reconcile after each argument – and there will be arguments, for this is real life. Love will help you to accept a person's weaknesses as a part of them. However, love will not stop you being annoyed at the way they eat their cornflakes or whistle with a trill. We are human, after all.

The love Jesus speaks of is challenging work and it is the work of a lifetime. This love is not just for couples who are in love, but is to be offered to everyone we encounter and even those with whom we will never be in contact. Love should be present in offices and boardrooms. Love should be in the way we communicate with one another, especially when we disagree. Love should help us to see beyond the manner in which a colleague or friend lashes out, as we seek to understand why. Love encourages us to see all of life through the lens of relationship.

This is my bias. I acknowledge that relationship is the lens through which I view life and how I read and understand the Bible. Life is not just about loving each other but about the experience of being loved, too. It is about finding good ways to live together as we care for other human beings as well as the rest of our planet. When we view the Covid-19 restrictions with which we have been living through the lens of relationship, they are not about rules being imposed upon us, but an act of care for one another.

Before we can care for one another, however, we must learn to care for ourselves. In order to gain a healthy perspective, it is good to step away from the everyday. If society encourages us to view busyness, power and wealth as the way of life to which we should aspire, then we need to stop and reflect in order to turn the everyday on its head and instead pursue love in all we do. When we allow ourselves to experience sabbath regularly, the result will be refreshment of our bodies and minds and the opportunity to choose love as our lens and our goal. May we become like balm for our troubled world in the name of Jesus.

Response

Take time to consider what love means to you.

Think about the love songs you know. What lyrics speak to you about real, challenging love?

Look at some newspaper headlines. How might you rewrite these through the lens of relationship?

Prayer

God of love,
as we take time to appreciate your real love for us,
may we become loving servants to others.
May we view life, love, and the universe
through the lens of relationship,
just as our Lord Jesus did.
Amen.