

## They'll Know We Are Christians by Our...?

John 15:9-17

Rev. Scott Anderson

May 5, 2024

Our scripture reading on this sixth Sunday of the Easter season comes from the middle of Jesus' farewell speech to the disciples. This speech highlights a unique feature of John's Gospel. In John's telling of the Jesus story, Jesus wraps up his public ministry in chapter 12, but the story of his arrest, death, and resurrection does not begin until chapter 18. So, we have these six in-between chapters. The scholarly name for those six chapters is "The Farewell Discourse."

But I like the way professor of preaching Fred Craddock describes it better. Craddock likens this scene between Jesus and his disciples to children playing on the floor, who happen to look up and see their parents putting on their coats and hats. When that happens, the children usually have three questions on their minds: "Where are you going? Can we go? Then who is going to stay with us now?"<sup>1</sup>

We hear all three of those concerns in this long good-bye conversation between Jesus and his disciples: "Lord, where are you going?" Thomas asks. "Why can I not follow you now?" questions Peter. "I will not leave you orphaned," promises Jesus.

I love the parallel Craddock draws because it speaks of such intimacy and relationship. And indeed, we see such intimacy and depth of relationship all throughout Jesus' good-bye words to his disciples: "Do not let your hearts be troubled...Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you."

We hear Jesus' words, and we begin to catch a glimpse of just how much space those disciples occupied, how much space we occupy, in Jesus' own heart. But I wonder, how often did the disciples reflect on that gift? How often do we, ourselves, breathe in and rest with the reality that in God's great love for us, fully expressed in Jesus Christ, we have been given space to occupy in God's heart?

The reality of our heart space in God is one thing Jesus was trying to get through the disciples' thick skulls that day. "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love...I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete...You are my friends [literally translated loved ones]...I have called you friends, (loved ones), because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father."

As he did last week with the imagery of the vine and branches, Jesus is again painting a picture of an intricately woven web of relationship between our triune God and humanity. A relationship that carries with it, though, a clear call and responsibility.

In the middle of the intimate conversation we hear today, Jesus states the call, the responsibility, quite matter-of-factly: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." In John's Gospel, this Farewell Discourse is the only section where Jesus uses the word commandment. The only place in the entire Gospel. And what is that one commandment Jesus repeatedly gives to those whom he loves, to those for whom he has given space in the heart of the divine? To do love for one another like he has done love for them.

In our culture, the word love often connotes something romantic for another person

---

<sup>1</sup> quoted in Frances Taylor Gench, *Encounters with Jesus*, p. 106

or an extreme fondness for something. We throw around the word love all the time. But in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, love is always more than a feeling. It is something you do, something that you do for the well-being of others sometimes regardless of how we actually feel about them. Henri Nouwen expands on that understanding when he writes, “if we wait for a feeling of love before loving, we may never learn to love well [but] when we do love, even if the others are not able to respond with love, we will discover that our feelings catch up with our actions.”

Over and over again, Jesus tells his friends, his loved ones, the disciples, that even when he becomes physically absent from them, they are called to live out their faith, their relationship with him, by doing love for one another, by seeking the well-being of others, regardless of how they actually feel about them. As a community of people who are so loved by God, as a community of people who have been told and who know they occupy space in the heart of the divine, as loved ones of Jesus, loving each other is to be our response.

I wish we had a better understanding of how countercultural Jesus’ commandment to do love might have sounded to those early disciples, because it sure sounds countercultural today. What Jesus is commanding is like Rachel Maddow doing something to help the well-being of Rush Limbaugh, or Ted Cruz actively contributing to the well-being of Joe Biden. Could that really ever happen? In an extremely partisan, viciously polarized political and religious climate, the thought of this kind of love for one another is almost unimaginable.

But according to the Gospel of John, living out that kind of love, working for each other’s well-being even regardless of how we feel about them, is exactly what is to be the central purpose for disciples, for followers of Jesus. Love is to be the first thing people see and know about Christians. The hymn we will sing following the sermon this morning has it exactly right: They’ll know we are Christians by our love.

But here is the sad truth: generally speaking, love is not what is usually seen. Love is not the first word people think of when they hear the term, Christian. Not by a long shot. Perhaps you are aware of the research done by the Barna group, a Christian polling group, which finished a five-year study that found unequivocally that when asked what word or phrases best describe Christianity, the top response given by Americans ages sixteen to twenty-nine was “anti-gay.” A staggering 91 percent of those who identified as non-Christians had the same response. And 80 percent of young churchgoers, around the age of Middle School, said the same thing. The next most popular responses to the term Christian were judgmental and hypocritical.<sup>2</sup> To some extent we are all complicit in this perception that we don’t do love very well, because sometimes we don’t.

Here’s my confession today: In seminary, I was a very secure closed-minded liberal. I was quite judgmental of those I considered judgmental. I sometimes still catch myself. But honestly, the irony of my position was completely lost on me until I started serving on a denominational task force 25 years ago charged with helping the church find a way forward in our conflicts over sexuality. The twenty of us who were appointed represented the most diverse group of Presbyterians I had ever sat with. Some of us were bitter adversaries at meetings of our General Assembly. We met three times a year for several days, each time over six years.

Something remarkable and unexpected happened. I got to know those whom I had typically judged. And then I realized my caricatures of them had to change, because I could

---

<sup>2</sup> quoted on the blog by Rachel Held Evans; this research is found in *unChristian* by David Kinnamon of the Barna group.

no longer just write them off as wrong or out of touch or unfaithful. As I got to know them as occupiers of God's heart just like me, I had to come to terms with my sinfulness in trying to act as God's bouncer. I had to confess that for years I had taken it upon myself to determine that when it came to them there must be a no-vacancy sign in God's heart. I had to start trying to love them even if I sometimes had a tough time liking them, and they, me.

The most conservative member of our group was Mike Loudon, pastor of a large Presbyterian congregation in Orlando, FL, and now retired. We disagreed vehemently about what the scripture does and doesn't say. But over the course of six years something transformational happened between us. We became friends. When I was re-ordained to the ministry in 2011, Mike sent me an email. It said, "you know how I feel about this ordination issue. But I want to know, when we both get to heaven, I hope my cottage is near yours."

The more I tried to act in ways that were loving towards those with whom I deeply disagreed, the more I realized my feelings were actually catching up with my actions, as Nouwen suggested they might. Over time, I began to sincerely care for them, to think of them as family, to be grateful for them, even though we continued to get on each other's nerves sometimes.

As a community of faith, we are commanded to do love and to start doing that better, both in here and out there, for the sake of the church, for the sake of the Gospel. Because if we don't, if love is not the first thing people see or experience when observing or participating in the church, then we are not fully being who God has created us to be—a people commanded to love one another as we have been loved by Jesus, which is completely, without reservation, holding nothing back. I admit it's a huge challenge.

So today let us recommit ourselves as a congregation, to do our best to be known for working on behalf of the well-being of each other, to honestly relate as family in Christ, even when it gets hard or messy. May we pray to feel so rooted in our place in God's heart, so grounded in our own abiding in God's love, that we will no longer have any need to push others away or to try and act as God's bouncers for those with whom life is made more challenging.

Our prayer could be that we will commit to do love for each other even if it takes a while for our feelings to catch up, for wouldn't it be something if when the Barna group does another study ten or twenty years from now, the first thing that comes to mind when thinking about those who try to follow Jesus is love. Because it's the fullest expression of the Gospel of Jesus Christ: "They'll know we are Christians by our love."

Amen.