

Easter 5C (5/19/2019)

Acts 11:1-18

Psalm 148

Revelation 21:1-6

John 13:31-35

Love knows what it's getting itself into, and loves anyway (Karoline Lewis). Love always costs something; it always involves sacrifice. Yet, without love, abundant life is impossible. Without love, God remains unknown.

The lectionary is a gift. Our three-year cycle of Bible readings allows us to hear a remarkable range of scripture over time, celebrating the wealth of witness inscribed in the pages of our sacred book. The lectionary acknowledges that this book is, in fact, a library, and this testimony is a conversation, one that continues as we listen and respond to the diversity of biblical voices that echo through the centuries and into our weekly gathering.

What's more, the lectionary liberates the preacher from his own idiosyncrasies. If it were up to me, you'd hear Gospels from Luke every other Sunday, with a smattering of references to the other three Gospels, Psalms, Isaiah, and Revelation. Maybe the occasional passage from Genesis, Exodus, Galatians, and Philippians. Maybe Ruth and Ecclesiastes. But mercifully, it's not up to me. To its credit, the lectionary facilitates broader exposure to, and thus more profound and challenging engagement with Holy Scripture as a whole.

On occasion, however, the lectionary fails us. Lifting a biblical passage from its context for the purpose of worship is necessary, but sometimes it does a disservice both to the context and to the passage itself. Today's Gospel from John

is a prime example. “I give you a new commandment,” Jesus tells his disciples, “that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” Is there a more straightforward teaching in the Bible? If ever we were to ask a portion of scripture to stand alone, wouldn’t it be this one?

If we did, however, we might take it for granted. It’s so familiar and so seemingly clear-cut that we might let it wash over us without really speaking to us. *Love one another*, we might think to ourselves, *Yes, isn’t love nice?* and go about our business unchanged. And, wouldn’t that be a missed opportunity? The love commandment is a pillar of the Christian confession; it’s at the very heart of what it means to follow Jesus. So, how can we hear it again today in a fresh way? How will it move us this time?

Reclaiming the context is a good start. Recall that this teaching takes place at the Last Supper, which in the Gospel of John centers on the footwashing. The one the disciples call Teacher and Lord surprises them by becoming their servant, setting for them an unforgettable example: “If I... have washed your feet,” he insists, “you also ought to wash one another’s feet.” ***Just as I have served you this meal of mercy, just as I have bent down to attend to your well-being, just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. To be fed and washed that we might feed and wash others is to partake in the very love of God.***

Both Judas and Peter are at the table with Jesus, by the way. Both Judas and Peter are fed and washed. Yet, both Judas and Peter will turn their backs on him.

In fact, the love commandment is bracketed by Judas' departure into the night on one side and Peter's threefold denial on the other.¹ In other words, love and betrayal sit side by side.

Isn't that the way with love? Love is not theoretical, but lived. Love feeds mouths and touches feet, for God's sake, so any love that's worth its salt recognizes the vulnerability of love. It doesn't shy away from but confronts all the complexity, all the risk inherent in human life, even the risk of unreciprocated love. To borrow the words of one interpreter, love is "aware of consequences... aware of challenges. [Love] knows what it is getting itself into, and... loves [anyway]."²

This means that **love is also uncalculating. It's profligate. It's foolish.**

And all for the sake of knowing the heart of God.

Jean Vanier, the founder of L'Arche, died on May 7th, leaving behind a celebrated legacy. The following tribute is from an article in the Washington Post:

More than 50 years ago, [Jean] Vanier sparked an unlikely movement of conscience. Shocked by the despair and loneliness he found at a psychiatric hospital outside Paris, Vanier did not merely adopt the cause of the intellectually disabled; he decided to buy a dilapidated house and live with Raphael Simi and Philippe Seux, two people with severe intellectual disabilities. "Essentially, they wanted a friend," Vanier said. "They were not very interested in my knowledge or my ability to do things, but rather they needed my heart and my being."

This highly personalized model of compassion now inspires 10,000 people who live together in more than 150 L'Arche group homes around the world. Those without intellectual disabilities — known as "assistants" —

¹ Karoline Lewis, "Real Love," <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5333>.

² Ibid.

spend a year or more committed to a L'Arche home and its disabled members. And the relationship can be transforming for both.

...In one sense, Vanier's approach to compassion is wildly inefficient. Who would design a social program that strives for a one-to-one ratio of helpers to helped? How could that type of effort possibly be scaled? But that is precisely the point. L'Arche is not a traditional social program. Its commitment to the dignity of people with intellectual disabilities is lavish, extravagant. It rejects a utilitarian cost-benefit analysis. And it certainly rejects a social Darwinism that views the vulnerable as worthless. By serving a group of human beings that others ignore or discount, Vanier made the case that no human being should be ignored or discounted.

[What's more,] not only are the disabled inherently valuable, but they also have much to teach us. "It has been this life together that has helped me become more human," Vanier reflected. "Those I have lived with have helped me to recognize and accept my own weaknesses and vulnerability. I no longer have to pretend I am strong or clever or better than others. I am like everybody else, with my fragilities and my gifts."³

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." Dear church, **love knows what it's getting itself into, and loves anyway. Love always costs something; it always involves sacrifice. Yet, without love, abundant life is impossible. Without love, God remains unknown.**

³ Michael Gerson, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/jean-vanier-created-a-wildly-inefficient-model-of-compassion-we-can-learn-a-lot-from-it/2019/05/09/6c91cc92-7295-11e9-9f06-5fc2ee80027a_story.html?utm_term=.c7e9132d0ad9.