

6 Easter
The Sunday Before the Ascension
May 6, 2018

**In the name of the God of all creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."

Easier said than done. This week, I ... along with others in the Dining With Dignity leadership ... have been dealing with finding a new location for this evening meal for our homeless neighbors in St. Augustine. It seems that someone has found a legal clause which prohibits Dining With Dignity from using the present site near the corner of Bridge and Granada Streets. We don't know who this person is, or their motivation, so people do what people do and speculate about what might have brought this about, and in the end that speculation leads to finger-pointing, fault-finding, and blame.

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."

What an ironic dilemma. Here we are, trying to "love one another" by providing a meal for our homeless brothers and sisters, yet getting caught up in animosity ... if not downright anger ... at someone we don't know, and have no idea about the reason or reasons they have for interfering with our acts of kindness.

As a co-founder of Compassionate St. Augustine I am also committed to another saying of Jesus:

"Do to others what you would want them to do to you."

Remember, it does not say:

"Do to others the way they do to you."

Rather:

"Do to others what you would want them to do to you."

In other words, take a little walk in the other's shoes. How would you want to be treated in this situation? Then that is the way you treat the other ... regardless of how they treat you.

So, here I am ... as are others ... caught between trying to take seriously what Jesus took seriously on the one hand ... and self-righteous anger on the other. I can even admit it ... and laugh about it. Yet, even in saying that, I think that this person who has foisted the law in front of city officials is smiling a devilish smile saying, "See, I got you between a rock and a hard place. If you really didn't take all that Jesus stuff so seriously you would confront me."

It seems to me that most of us are here in this sanctuary week after week because we believe that our deeds and actions can make a positive difference in the world around us ... the world

of our closest family and friends ... the world of our neighborhoods and schools and work places and churches ... and the world of our state, our nation, and the world of all our fellow citizens on this planet. We come here to be inspired, encouraged, and affirmed that we can love beyond our limitations ... and we keep trying. But, as human beings, can we really intellectually decide that we are going to love someone even when our gut is responding differently ... even when our fear is telling us to be cautious.

Can we be ordered to love? Does love obey decrees? My guess is, most of us would say no. Shaped as we are by Hollywood, or Jane Austen novels, or romantic poetry, we usually think of love as spontaneous and free-flowing. We fall in love ... love is blind ... love happens at first sight ... and love breaks our hearts.

Even if we put our culture's simplistic clichés aside, we know that authentic love can't be manipulated, simulated, or rushed without suffering serious distortion. Those of us who are parents understand full well that demanding children to love each other never works. The most we can do is insist that our children behave *as if* they love each other: "Share your toys." "Say sorry." "Don't hit." "Use kind words." And, remember, we are parents for life ... those same admonitions apply to our adult children just as much as they applied to them when they were just kids.

But these actions ... often performed with gritted teeth and rolling eyes ... aren't the same as what Jesus is talking about in John's Gospel. Jesus doesn't say, "Act as if you love." He doesn't give his disciples ... or us ... the easy "out" of doing nice things with clenched hearts. In reality, I don't think I would want him to ... nothing feels as hollow as a "loving" act performed mechanically or under duress. Moreover, I doubt that the people who flocked to Jesus would have done so if they sensed that his compassion was thin or forced. Jesus said, "Love as I have loved you." ... as in, for real ... as in, the whole genuine package ... authentic feeling, honest engagement, generous action. But, honestly, doesn't it sound like Jesus is asking for the impossible?

G.K Chesterton once wrote that "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried." Imagine what would happen to us, to the Church, to the world, if we took this commandment of Jesus' seriously? What could our world look like if we obeyed this commandment and really cultivated "impossible" love?

I ask this question uneasily, because I'm not sure how to answer it, even for myself. I know fairly well how to do things. I know how to prepare food for Dining With Dignity. It is easy to grab something out of the cupboard for the Ecumenical Food Pantry. Or even to send a check to Episcopal Relief and Development or Compassionate St. Augustine, or another of my favorite charities. But do I know how to love the love that Jesus is talking about ... the love that Jesus loved? To feel a depth of compassion that's gut-wrenching? To experience a hunger for justice so fierce and so urgent that I rearrange my life in order to pursue it? To empathize until my heart breaks? Do I know what that kind of love really is? Have I ever known that kind of love?

Most of the time ... I'll be honest ... the answer is, "I don't." Rather than go that far I would rather play it safe. I want to keep my circle small and manageable. And I want to choose the people I love based on my own relationships and preferences ... not on Jesus's all-inclusive commandment. Charitable actions are easy. But cultivating my heart and soul? Becoming vulnerable in authentic ways to the world's pain? Those things are hard ... they are hard and costly.

So what can I do? Where must I begin? Jesus offers a single, straightforward answer: "Abide in my love." Following on the heels of last week's Gospel reading, Jesus extends the metaphor of the vine and branches and calls us once again to "abide." To rest, to cling, to make ourselves at home. Not simply in him, but in the love of Jesus.

My problem is that I often treat Jesus as a role model ... trying to take seriously what Jesus took seriously ... and then despair when I can't live up to such high standards. But abiding in something is not the same as emulating it. In the vine-and-branches metaphor, Jesus's love is not our example ... it's our source. It's where our love originates and deepens ... it is where our love replenishes itself. In other words, if we don't abide, we can't love. Jesus' commandment to us is not that we wear ourselves out, trying to conjure love from our own easily depleted resources. Rather, it's that we abide in the holy place where human love becomes possible. That we make our home in Jesus's love ... the most abundant and inexhaustible love in existence.

What comes to mind is the story of Jesus in Caesarea Philippi. Jesus had been teaching, and healing, and casting out demons in Galilee. About half way through Mark's gospel Jesus goes to Sidon ... north and west of Galilee ... Sidon was on the Mediterranean coast. He went there for a retreat of sorts, and encountered a woman whose daughter was possessed by a spirit ... but she was not Jewish. There was a small argument, but in the end Jesus healed her.

From there, Jesus went to Caesarea Philippi ... which was almost due east from Sidon and a little farther north. Caesarea Philippi is the source of the Jordan River in which Jesus was baptized. The Jordan River starts as a spring in a cave in the side of a mountain. It is at Caesarea Philippi that Jesus asks his disciples "Who am I?" It is on a mountain just north of Caesarea Philippi where the Transfiguration happened. And, it is at Caesarea Philippi that Jesus turns south and heads toward Jerusalem.

For me ... maybe not for others, but for me ... this was one of the places in the Jesus story where he "abided" in God's love. In the very waters in which he had been baptized, and proclaimed as God's beloved, Jesus returned to the source to re-experience that same love ... not for what he could or could not do ... but love for just who he was. It was a reminder that it wasn't about **DOING**, but rather about **BEING**. And, that love in which Jesus abided was so powerful that he could set his face toward Jerusalem regardless of the cost.

As is so often the case in our lives as people of faith, Jesus's commandment leads us straight to paradox ... we are called to action by way of rest and renewal. We are called to **BECOME** love.

Not to **DO** love, but **BECOME** love. And we do that as we abide in love. That is the place of true contemplative prayer. To quiet the world around us so that we can fully experience what it means to be a beloved child of God. The commandment ... or better yet, the invitation ... is to drink our fill of this sacred source ... to know we are blessed ... then to spill over to bless the world ... and finally return to the sacred source for a fresh in-filling. This is our movement ... our rhythm ... our dance. Over and over again. This is where we begin and end and begin again.

Yes, sometimes in this life we are caught between a rock and a hard place. However, we are also given a way out.

I am reminded of the quote from T. S. Eliot:

"We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time."

Jesus said:

"Love one another as I have loved you."

"Abide in my love."

"Love one another as I have loved you."

"Abide in my love."

These are finally not two separate actions. They are one and the same. One "impossible" commandment to save the world.

Amen.