

Acts 11:1-18
Psalm 148
Revelation 21:1-6
John 13:31-35

It's more than good to be back!!! Not only do I feel physically much better, but my heart is soothed as well by seeing all your faces and standing in a spot that has come to feel like 'home' to me. I can't begin to express my gratitude for the cards, the e-mails, the phone calls and the text messages filled with good vibes and best wishes and most of all with prayers for my speedy recovery. I'll never forget the beautiful flowers either which will soon be planted in the garden at the Rectory and will always remind me of this time when the parish rose up collectively and individually to take care of me. These last few weeks have felt like being bathed in love...even when my eyes hurt....and that particular bath always makes me feel better! So you can imagine my glee when I picked up the scripture readings today and discovered that they were all about loving each other!!

This scripture passage appears in the section of the Gospel of John that is known as the Final Discourse. It is filled with all the things Jesus wants his disciples to know about what is about to happen and what he wants them to do once he has departed. It is, in effect, his farewell to the troops. Much like parents preparing to take a long trip, he is telling his 'children' what he expects of them in his absence. He even addresses the disciples as "Little children." Like most little children when parents try to explain something to them that is far beyond their understanding, the disciples look at Jesus with wide eyes and no comprehension. They don't know what he's talking about. And they can't possibly understand the magnitude of what he is saying! Just five weeks ago, Jesus was resurrected from the dead. They are still trying to wrap their brains around that inconceivable and impossible action. They're still trying to process that and make sense of it all. What can Jesus possibly mean? We can't go with him? Why not? We've gone everywhere with him so far. Some pieces of information just freeze the brain in one place and defy processing what's just been seen or heard. The disciples are still trying to figure out how it could be that a month after Jesus was crucified, he's standing (or sitting) right in front of them...as if he were a real, live person...because he is! He was then...and he is now!!

And just like any conscientious shepherd or parents, Jesus is carefully explaining to the disciples how he wants them to behave in his absence which will come soon. On the face of it, it sounds so easy, "Love one another as I have loved you!" If you do that then everyone will know that you belong to me. On the surface of things...that sounds easy enough...but if we sit back and contemplate that single command, we realize...as Jesus' little children realized...that loving others...even the ones we are closest to...is not nearly as easy as we would like it to be. And

loving those folks in the way that Jesus loves them is nearly impossible. So what kind of love is Jesus talking about and what examples did he give us of how he expects us to love? Let's start with the disciples. He clearly loved Peter...and perhaps he loved Peter the most. He never says. But he never turns his back on Peter...even when Peter betrayed him in the darkest hour possible. Jesus not only predicted that Peter would do that, he also provided a way to restore that relationship. After the resurrection, he simply asked Peter three times: "Do you love me?" and Peter's three answers are "Of course I love you!" covered the three denials Peter made about knowing Jesus just before the crucifixion. Jesus' ability to forgive such an egregious act of treachery is the action he is his modeling for us. Peter's denial of Jesus in the deathly hour when Jesus needed him most was enough to send anyone stomping off from a relationship. But Jesus did the opposite of what the ordinary mortal might do. He didn't rant and rave about how disappointed and hurt he was by Peter's denials in a very crucial moment in Jesus' life. All Jesus did was reach back into the love that had existed between them from the beginning and reassured Peter that he still loved him. The relationship wasn't broken. Jesus' forgiveness was all-encompassing and Jesus went on to make Peter the head of His church!! Jesus had every reason to hold a grudge; to keep Peter at arm's length for a very long time; and to never trust him again. What Peter had done was unforgiveable, but that's not what Jesus did. Despite Peter's betrayal, Jesus forgave him and restored the relationship. In that one action, Jesus showed us not only what God is willing to do, but what Jesus himself is willing to do and what Jesus is asking *us* to do! Apparently, the word 'unforgiveable' should never be uttered by a person claiming to be a Christian or by one who claims to be following Jesus Christ. Think about the person who lives in the back of your brain because they have wounded you so badly. Think about the anger that can still well up within you when you think about that person. Think how you might react if Jesus was standing in front of you and asked you to forgive that person...the let go of that anger and that malice in your heart...and just let it go. What would that be like for you? Is that what Jesus is asking you to do? You don't necessarily ever need to be close to that person again. You just need to release your resentment and your anger and your hurt and your profound disappointment along with your burning desire to hurt them back. That's a temptation for all of us, but it's not what Jesus taught us or expects from us.

And Jesus didn't tell us to love each other even though the other person doesn't deserve our love or our kindness or our forgiveness. Jesus told us to love one another because that's *good* for us!! That's healthy for us!! We sleep better; we feel better; we feel better about ourselves; we are calmer; we think more clearly; and our blood pressure goes down.

Jesus' commandment to love one another isn't given just to his disciples. That's simply where Jesus starts. And what do you think Jesus' attitude was toward Judas? He knew what Judas was going to do and he washed his feet and gave him bread and wine at the first communion anyway. He loved him anyway. He could behave in a loving way to Judas anyway. No cutting

criticisms or sarcastic and cruel remarks for Judas. Stop and think for a moment how hard that would be for you to do if you knew that the person that was going to arrange for your death was sitting right in front of you? Jesus takes us into some strange territory, but he's showing us how to love. We don't love because we expect to get something back. We love because that's what Jesus told us to do. He told us to love...not so that we could build our own social network or popularity...he told us to love because he wanted us to follow him and to obey God. And this is what is asked of us...not just when it's easy, but when it's very, very hard!

Think about the thief being crucified next to Jesus. They were hardly peers, but the man believed what Jesus said about paradise and Jesus promised the man that *today* they would be together in paradise. He didn't hold out on this man who readily admits that he deserved the punishment he was suffering alongside Jesus. He didn't protest his innocence. He didn't even express regret over his behavior and the missteps that led him to the cross. He simply asked...and Jesus simply says "yes." What does that tell us about the nature of God? What does that tell us about how God feels about us?Each and every one of us!

And what about the woman about to be stoned for adultery? It would be very easy to say that she deserved what was coming to her. Isn't that the sort of thing the self-righteous would say? But Jesus never once condemned her or told her that she deserved this punishment. He stood beside her and charged the crowd that if anyone was without fault, that person should cast the first stone. No one threw anything! And Jesus certainly could have thrown the first stone at her, but he didn't? And one by one, they all just wandered away and left Jesus and the outcast woman alone.

Love is not about holding grudges and nursing wounds. Love is not about competition. Love is not about assuaging guilt. Love is not about justifying ourselves in our actions. Love is not about intolerance or punishment. Love is not falsely fawning over someone or trying to curry favor with them. Love is not ambitious. Love is never cruel or contemptuous. Love does not judge others.

What Jesus asks us to do in his name is hard. And don't ever think for one minute that if you are trying to follow Jesus that it's going to be an easy journey. It's not. There will be many disappointments. There will be many misunderstandings. There will be more slights than you want to acknowledge. There will be urges for revenge and there will be failed attempts to be at peace. But Jesus was most insistent that he wants his followers to love each other. If the disciples could love each other then they had a chance of spreading Jesus' message far and wide. And Jesus taught them well. Loving others...truly loving others...is to put our own feelings on the back burner; to give everyone a wide berth; and to forgive at every turn...even when someone has wounded us deliberately. The one who intentionally wounds is absolutely desperate for care and concern and connection. Love 'em like Jesus did.

Through his disciple, Peter, Jesus gave us the church...the body of Christ in the world. Within its walls are people who believe in Jesus and who believe Jesus. Each one is trying to do what Jesus asks of them. Forgiveness is the lubricant. And love is the glue. The church is a marvelous incubator or laboratory for trying out all the things Jesus urged us to do in the larger world....if only we would try them all out!!

If we can love the others in our church, then we can spread the love to the larger community and they will know who we are by the way we treat each other. Think about all those in our church family at St. Paul's. If there's someone here that you're struggling to love or forgive or support, think about that, and ask yourself how Jesus would want you to handle this. Because if we can love one another like Jesus loved his disciples, there's nothing we can't do in his name.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.