

The Rev. Shelley Ryan
St. Luke's Episcopal Church ~ Anchorage, Kentucky
The Fifth Sunday of Easter ~ April 23 & 24, 2016
John 13:31-35

When I was a child growing up in the 60's I can vividly recall a lot of the music that my parents used to listen to. One of my favorite songs was a song called 'What the World needs now is Love.' I really liked that song because it brought me a sense of comfort and hope. Though I was only a young child, I recall overhearing adult conversations and news programs addressing current events such as the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, and the Cuban missile crises, as living on the east coast of Florida we practiced 'Duck & Cover' drills at my school. Even though I was a child I experienced some fear and uncertainty and hearing the song just made me feel better about things. Hal David, who wrote the lyrics for the song states that in his lyrics – "he is talking to God."

So what about you? Is there a particular song or hymn that comes to mind that brings you a sense of hope and comfort when you are feeling fearful or uncertain about things? Overall, some might say that we aren't much better off today than we were then, concerning the events that continue to take place around the world.

Imagine how the disciples must have felt when Jesus told them that evening of the Last Supper that he would only be with them a little longer.... Talk about fear and uncertainty. Only moments earlier, Jesus had revealed to the disciples that one among them would betray him, so as you can imagine there must have been an air of confusion and fear among them. Only a few days earlier Jesus made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, which perhaps led the disciples to believe that He was preparing to assert his messianic authority in the Holy City. But instead they were confronted with the conundrum of His departure and leading them to ask why they could

not go with him? Jesus responds lovingly and tenderly by addressing them as ‘little children’ and He gives them a new commandment “That you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” This love that Jesus alludes to is emblematic of who God is in Jesus, and therefore who the disciples are because of Jesus. Jesus expresses this act of profound love earlier that evening as he washed the disciples’ feet, and He has given this command so that the disciples may imitate this love for one another.

Allow me to paraphrase New Testament professor John Yieh who demonstrates four illustrative points about this commandment that are worthy of noting. First – the commandment to love one another is meant to help the disciples cope with their anguish over Jesus’ death and their anxiety over separation. Jesus’ absence will require a mutual love that is essential to sustain their faith, hope, and love as a community of believers.

Second – The absence of Jesus would result in the disciples feeling abandoned and afraid, and this was clearly illustrated in our Gospel reading a few weeks ago, as the disciples locked themselves up in a room following Jesus’ crucifixion, because they were fearful. This mutual love for one another was an antidote for their fear of being besieged by pressure from hostilities from the world. Third – The commandment to love one another set the standard, as the disciples are compelled to love one another the way that Jesus loves them. Time and time again, the disciples witnessed that Jesus loves all who come to Him, “in spite of His hunger, fatigue or risk of life.” And finally– the command to love one another is a hallmark of discipleship. As Yieh puts it “the commandment to love one another is not merely a strategy for survival, but it is also a way to build and expand the community of faith.”

So where does this commandment leave us today? Love and loving one another is intended to be at the core of our faith, and yet we continue to build walls stemming from

theological or cultural differences and myriads of other discords. A fairly recent article in Christianity Today illustrates that Sunday morning remains to be one of the most segregated hours in American life. This segregation is derived not only from differences of race and ethnicity, but also from denominational and socioeconomic affiliation.

However, in His Farewell discourse Jesus gives his disciples the new commandment that is quite simple ‘Love one another, just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.’ But it really isn’t that simple is it? It seems simple, but it is a great challenge for us, because it requires us to visit the difficult task of allowing ourselves to be vulnerable. We naturally feel a sense of security because it is easy for us to become so embedded in our particular values and beliefs. Now of course this can be a good thing, but it takes an element of courage and of course vulnerability for us to let our guard down a bit in order to listen and truly hear others who may be very different from ourselves. It is important that we keep this in mind - Jesus does not call us to a doctrine; he simply calls us to love one another - in spite of our differences. I find it so interesting that the more I talk with people from a variety of different, faiths, backgrounds, and beliefs, the one thing that always reveals itself is that, in the end, we are so much more alike than we are different.

So here is our challenge...and it is indeed a significant challenge that may take us a lifetime to accomplish, but the most important thing that we can do is to strive day by day to live as Jesus commands “to love one another just as I have loved you. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

