

Acts 11:1-18

Psalm 148

Revelation 21:1-6

John 13:31-35

You are not experiencing déjà vu!!! If you were here for our Holy Week service on Maundy Thursday, you may remember this passage from John's gospel. So if you're sitting there thinking to yourself, "Didn't we just hear this same scripture passage a few weeks ago?" you're absolutely right. We did. Holy Week has come and gone and we are in the fifth week of celebrating the resurrection of Jesus. So why would we be reviewing a passage from Holy Week while we are celebrating Easter? Because, this small little passage in the gospel of John is so very important given the context in which these words were spoken by Jesus.

It is the night before the crucifixion. Jesus has just washed the feet of his disciples and now, reclining at the table after supper, relaxing and enjoying each other's company and savoring the sweet respite from the teeming crowds flooding the streets of Jerusalem for Passover. Jesus realizes how priceless and poignant this time truly is. Judas has gone out. The die is cast. Everything has been set into motion and Jesus knows that the time is running out. There is no turning back now. Jesus seizes this precious moment to tell his disciples the one thing that is most important to him. The one thing that he wants them to remember after his death. If they remember nothing else, he wants them to remember this.

He is surrounded by these eleven grown men who have travelled with him: questioned him, hung on his every word, argued with him, been mesmerized by him, been taught by him and have been challenged by him. They have seen him perform miracles....lots of them....and to speak with a wisdom that is beyond all of them. And they have no earthly clue what is about to happen. Jesus must have looked at them with gentle, loving eyes that spoke almost as eloquently as his voice. Their time together is almost gone. Jesus knows it. This is not the time to be coy or cryptic. This is the time to speak just as plainly as he can about the one thing he wants most for them to remember.

He speaks to them in the most intimate way, "Little children," he says to this gathering of grown men. "I am with you only a little while longer. You will look for me, but where I am going you cannot come." This is the clarion cry...the warning bell. Listen up, Guys. I have something important to tell you. These are my parting words to you. Pay attention. This above all else is what I want you to know and to remember and to do:

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.

Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

That's it. Love each other. Did you get it? That's what I want you to do. Love each other. Love each other. Love each other just like I have loved you!

It's a small sentence that fills the ears and baffles the brain. It is a statement that is simple enough for a small child to memorize and repeat, but it is profound enough that mature believers are repeatedly embarrassed at how poorly they comprehend it and put it into practice. Easier said than done, Jesus!

But there is an interesting wrinkle to the translation of the last part of this passage. "Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also *should* love one another." The Greek word that has been translated as 'should' can also be translated as 'in order that'. So the passage could just as easily read: "Love one another. Just as I have loved you *in order that* you *can* love one another." *I have loved you so that you are able to love one another.* Jesus has loved them in multiple ways and in doing so has filled up their emotional cups until they are overflowing. Jesus has not only taught them how to love by loving them, but he has given them the energy and the resources to pass this love along to each other once he is gone. Jesus knows that their emotional cups are about to be drained. They need to fill each other up when Jesus is no longer with them to do that. This is what he wants them...and us...to remember. This is what he is charging them...and us...to do.

The action of 'loving each other' is the action of support for one another, care for one another, lending each other courage when someone's resolve flags, holding one another in the midst of fear and confusion, lifting one another up in moments of despair. Jesus not only modelled it for them, he gave them enough to be able to sustain them and enough for them to give to each other. Jesus' love was transformative. Jesus was saying to them, "Do for each other what I have done for you!" Feed each other and fill each other up just as I have filled you up! They will know you are my disciples when they see how you care for each other in the same way I cared for you.

This was the single most important thing to Jesus...that his followers loved and took care of each other. Over the last couple of millenia, we have strayed pretty far from that path. Jesus did not tell us to memorize Bible passages, although there's nothing wrong with that. Jesus also didn't tell us that we had to profess a certain creed about him in order to be his followers. What he said was, "Love each other!" He didn't tell us that we were his followers by adhering to certain doctrines about Christianity that have developed over the last two thousand years. He didn't say, "I want you to believe this...not that!" He didn't tell his disciples *what* to believe. He told them to love each other and take care of each other. Through the ages, Christians have waged war...with each other...over doctrines and that's not what Jesus told us to do. Jesus is *still* not telling us to do that. It's not easy to wade through the differences of opinion among very devout, committed well-meaning Christians who don't see eye to eye. These differences of opinion have done far too much damage to individual Christians as well as to the body of Christ in the world which is the Church. And that's *not* what Jesus asked them...or us...to do!

There are many, many social issues and personal lifestyle issues and doctrinal issues of faith that come before us in a constant stream and demand that we take a side...one way or another. Are you for it or against it? Will you accept it or reject it? What would Jesus think about this? How are you going to react about that? Will you take a stand or will you sit this one out? It's as confusing as it can be. And the most frustrating part is, there are no clearcut, easy answers. All the issues are hard and complex.

But think about this. As impossible as it is for any of us to know the mind of God...for any of us to discern what God has to say about the pressing issues of our day...remember Jesus' parting words: Love one another! He didn't say love only the people who are 'right' about an issue. He didn't say love only the people who have read the Bible cover to cover and memorized half of it. He didn't say love only the people who go to church every Sunday. He didn't say love only the people who pray the way you think people should pray. He didn't say love only the people who say...and understand...the creed every Sunday. He didn't say love only the people who don't live a sinful life...and we all need good luck finding those.

He said, "Love each other! If you love me, love each other!" He didn't say love only the people you agree with. There is absolutely no reason in the world to cut the body of Christ in half...in other words, break a church in two...because of a difference of opinion. Jesus didn't say "You must believe in the correct doctrine." Jesus said, "Love one another in the way that I have loved you!" Period. End of message. No qualifiers. No exceptions.

There is no way that any of us can know the mind of God, so we will never know whether or not we have come down on the right side or the wrong side of a divisive issue. But rest assured, if God didn't reject us or turn his back on us when we were 'in-your-face...I'm-not-going-to-do-what-you-want-me-to-do' sinners, then God is certainly not going to turn his back on us if we come down on the wrong side of a doctrinal or social issue in good faith! The litmus test for reaching your decision need only be: "Is my response the loving thing to do in this situation?" If it is, you are on pretty solid ground. Any response that requires you to shun others is not what Jesus has commanded. As a matter of fact, Jesus consistently sought out those who had been shunned and marginalized by others...and he filled their cups with love and forgiveness.

For Jesus' last commandment to his disciples and to us is just this: "Love one another as I have loved you."

For this bit of direction from Jesus we can only say,

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.