

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

You're sitting at a meal with your friends. It's supposed to be a happy celebration, but it's getting weird. You don't know that this will be the last time you will be gathered around the table with the president of your club. He's just said that one of you is going to sell him out, and that member has gotten up and left. And in a few minutes, he's going to tell you that the one who claims to be his best supporter is going to say, "No, I never knew him" three times in a single night. Sandwiched in between these two painful episodes our friend, our leader, is telling us we need to love because God loves. We need to love the ones who betray us, we need to love the ones who turn their backs on us in times of trouble, and we need to love those who are not easy to love.

William's syndrome is a disease that 1 in 10,000 people are born with; it can't be developed later in life. I have a friend with this disease. My friend calls me mom, I call him Derek. William's syndrome affects development of the face, sometimes the muscles, and the brain. Derek is such a loving person, he is witty, chatty, and very friendly but people push him away. We were having a conversation through messenger yesterday and he said it's hard to love. I agreed with him, it is hard to love because people betray you. People turn against you. People talk about you behind your back. We even need to love those people who don't love us. And I told him that is why we need to allow ourselves to be filled up with God's love until it is overflowing because we are supposed to love all those people. And it is hard. We can't do it on our own.

But Jesus again tells us, as he told his disciples at the last supper, we are commanded to love one another just as Jesus loves us. If God can handle loving the people who betrayed him, the ones who turned against him, and the ones who didn't love him, we can do the same through him. People know we are Christians by our love. But what does our love look like?

It looks like a group of people coming in and marking items for the election day sale. It looks like people baking items for the same sale. It looks like people donating their talents to make quilts for people they will never know. It looks like making donations for hygiene kits, filling our little pantry, donating to Trinity food pantry. It looks like we're having a good time gathering together and being kind to one another. It looks like us making phone calls to those people we haven't seen in a while or smiling and waving to our neighbor. Even the one who lets their dog use your yard and doesn't clean it up. Even the one who rides his 4-wheeler up and down the road. Even the one who plays their music too loud at 4 in the morning. Even the one who doesn't return the wave. Jesus is the living demonstration that God loves the world. We love Jesus. If we love Jesus, then we love the people of the world.

This world brings us loss, human failure, disruption. God and Jesus set the world right again. Because we know where the Omega is taking us, we will love to the very end. We know that Jesus is the alpha and the omega, and wherever we fit into that timeline is where we find our hope, our hope that because we are loved we love. Because Jesus loves us, we love.

The disciples are sitting at dinner with Jesus, and Jesus has fed even the one who is going to betray him that night, that one who has walked out the door. The one who not only is betraying Jesus, but is betraying them as well. Someone whom they believed to be their friend, someone whom they trusted has walked away from their relationship. And Jesus speaks love into their hearts at that very moment. The love they share will be what sustains them in Jesus.

Jesus is telling them how to feel his love even when he will no longer be present. We can feel and express this love when Jesus isn't present. We are Jesus' disciples.

Our reading from Acts tells us that we are to share the table together with all those who are different from us, with all those who think differently, who look differently, who act differently than what we do. The reading from Acts is talking about resurrection ethics, what love looks like and how it is practiced as hospitality. It tells us the story of what God's love in humanity looks like. About Jesus' love for the world. Peter has proclaimed to those who would condemn him for eating with the Gentiles that "God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" The permanent walls have been broken down and belonging is possible.

It's not an easy word to hear. Because love isn't easy. And unless we allow ourselves to be filled to the brim and overflowing with God's love, we can't do it. How do we become filled up with God's love? By building a relationship with God through Bible reading, prayer, listening. Not just when it's convenient but making it a priority to begin and end our day with a conversation with God. It doesn't stop there. It's thinking about God, allowing God to fill your mind throughout the day.

As we do this, we see God's promise being fulfilled. God's promise is coming here to earth. And one day God's presence will be on earth. Our reading from Revelation tells us that there will be a new heaven and a new earth, and it is all coming here. And it is praiseworthy. The tears from betrayal are wiped from our eyes, the mourning of death has turned to rejoicing. The brokenness of disease has been healed. Hunger and thirst have been filled. This is the abundant life; this is the promise. Salvation is in God's presence. Resurrection is the promise of God's presence even in the reality of death.

Jesus was sitting at a meal with his followers in the midst of all he knew about humanity and telling them that he is love. That we need to love as he loves. And we live in the promise that he will return.

All glory be to God.