

Acts 10:44-48

Psalm 98

1 John 5:1-6

John 15:9-17

It seems a bit ironic that the Sunday we are celebrating Jesus explaining to his disciples and to us about love that we should also be celebrating Mother's Day. Almost all of us equate the word 'mother' with the word 'love' even if our own relationship with our own mother was complicated and uncertain. Theoretically, the first experience we have with being loved comes from our mothers, but that's not universally true. Not everyone has an idyllic relationship with Mom. Sometimes it's difficult or even painful. But even if our relationship with our mother is fraught with ambiguity or mixed emotions or hurt and disappointment, we still tend to link the words 'mother' and 'love' together. And sometimes motherhood never comes to women who long to have children of their own. Or perhaps death has come too soon to our own mother. Mother's Day is not always a happy day!

So if your experience with your mother was less than ideal, how did you learn about love? Who made you feel loved? Who made you feel important and special? Somewhere along the way, each one of us has encountered the experience of love. The only way we learn how to love someone else is when someone else loves us first and shows us what it's like. That's what Jesus did for the disciples. Jesus showed them what love meant and what it looks like and why it is important. In many respects it's the glue that holds human relationships together....not to mention keeping us tethered to the Trinity.

In Jesus' story, we are situated this morning between the resurrection and the ascension. We are with Jesus and his disciples in the in-between time when he has been raised from the dead, but is still on earth with his disciples. Imagine what it must have been like for all of them to be eating and speaking and walking with Jesus after they watched him die. It's enough to make one's head explode. It's a disconcerting mind-altering time for the disciples and Jesus is giving them some final instructions about how to carry on without him. He has risen from the dead, so

the disciples now know that death is not the last word, but even now...two thousand years later...that concept is hard for us to comprehend. How can that be? In this liminal time...between death and life...Jesus has one last...and very important instruction for them. The one thing that Jesus wants to impress upon them is how important it is that they practice love...on a daily...even hourly basis...with every human being they encounter...those they know and those they don't...but most especially with one another. Jesus has already told them that people in general will know they are his followers by the way they love one another. If they can keep the love of Jesus going and pass it along to others, then the dream of a community of believers will come to pass. That dream continues to this very day. That's the first lesson from Jesus in this passage.

The other thing to keep in mind is the audience that the writer of the gospel of John is speaking to. They are living in perilous times. The Jewish community is still under Roman oppression and it's getting worse. The only safe haven for any of them is the community that has grown up around the synagogue. It is their religion that keeps them whole. All of a sudden, Jesus' followers find themselves in the very awkward and painful position of risking being ejected from the synagogue and ostracized by their fellow Jews because now they believe that Jesus is exactly who he said he was. They believe that Jesus is the Messiah...the chosen one of Israel. They believe that He is the one who was sent by God to save all of them. But such a belief is heresy to the devout Jews who believe in the one true God and who are not ready to embrace Jesus as the Son of God. To them, that's heresy of the worst order and they want nothing to do with anyone who believes such treachery. If we stop and think long enough, we can sympathize with how they feel and what they think. How would we feel in a similar position? They are the faithful Jews worshipping the one, true God who brought them out of Egypt and led them through the wilderness and delivered them into the Promised Land. The idea that anyone would be so presumptuous as to claim Messiahship was offensive to these devout Jews. They wanted nothing to do with these outliers. There is no love at all for them. To the devout Jews, these followers of Jesus are a menace. So there they are...this little band of true believers...caught between the oppression of Rome and the ostracism of their own fellow Jews. There's no place to go. There's no place to hide. There's no way to feel safe at all. And now

Jesus himself is about to leave them on their own. In some respects, they were forced to rely on each other. They were forced to look out for one another. They were forced to think of the good of the whole rather than what was best for any one of them individually. What was it the Founding Fathers of this country said to one another as they plotted the revolution against the King of England: "Gentlemen, if we don't hang together we shall surely hang individually." This little band of Jewish followers of Jesus were in much the same position.

As Jesus is talking to them...and preparing them to be on their own...he is shifting the paradigm of his relationship with them. Up until this moment, they have been his followers. They have been his students...his disciples. There was no sense of equality between Jesus and the disciples, but all of a sudden Jesus refers to them as 'friends.' He explains to them that slaves and servants have no idea what the master is doing or why, but Jesus has let them in on all the conversations that have transpired between Jesus and God. They know exactly what's been going on between Jesus and God. And they know about the Transfiguration when Jesus sought counsel from Moses and Elijah at the top of the mountain. Jesus reminds them that initially, they didn't choose him, he chose them and now he calls them 'friends' which puts them on an equal par with Jesus in terms of their relationship. They are no longer in a one-down position. Jesus has elevated them to the status of 'friend.'

Jesus goes on to explain to them that he has said things and done things in an effort to help them experience what love is really like. It's something that happens between people of similar standing. It's the glue that holds a relationship together...in good times and in bad. There's never been a perfect relationship except the one that Jesus has with God, but Jesus has shown them how to deal with each other by letting them see how He deals with them. Love is what holds it all together. And Jesus reminds them that there is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friend. That's what Jesus has done for them...and for all of us. But is Jesus requiring that we physically die in order to demonstrate our love for one another? Perhaps...but then again...perhaps not.

Maybe what Jesus is making reference to is the number of times and the way we may need to defer to those we love so that they might have what they want and what they need. Maybe 'laying down our life' is the equivalent of setting aside our own priorities and wishes in order for

someone else to have fulfill their priorities. Maybe laying down our own lives means laying down our own plans, or own wishes, our own priorities so that our friend...or perhaps our family...might be able to live their own life more fully. Think of all the times we have insisted on having our own way. Maybe Jesus is reminding us that loving someone else means never insisting on having our own way.

The love that Jesus showed to all of us was, indeed, a question of actually laying down his own life...literally...and in a most traumatic and tragic fashion...so that we could be reconciled to the one who created us. Greater love hath no man! We know about love...what it is and how it feels...only when someone else loves us first. That's what Jesus did for his disciples and for us and that's what Jesus encourages us to do even now. We learn about love by being on the receiving end of someone else's capacity to love. We learn what that feels like and what that looks like. We learn from those who love us...including Jesus...what we are supposed to do and what we are supposed to say in order to love someone else. It's a powerful force...this thing called love. It can move mountains and melt hearts and change minds in ways that we never dreamt possible. It can encourage someone to change direction...which, of course, is what 'repent' actually means.

Jesus made the first move to show us how to love one another. Will we follow his lead and keep the love going? Will we stand aside and let our own priorities go in order to make someone else feel heard and important and cared for? Will we love someone else so that they can experience that kind of feeling and be inspired to live that way themselves? Jesus has given us the key to build people up, to change hearts, to mend people's brokenness if only we cared more about them than we do for ourselves. Jesus has given us the key to the hearts and minds of others. Will we use it? Will we use it to further the kingdom Jesus told us about? Will we be more concerned with someone else's welfare than our own? Will we let Jesus love us and use what we experience with him to pass along that love to others? That's what Jesus asked his disciples to do and that's what Jesus is asking us to do? Will we do it?

With God's help we can and we will.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.