

Abiding Love for One Another: The Good News (and the Bad News)

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Based on a sermon written by the Rev. Kay Sylvester, Rector, St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Tustin CA, May 13, 2012

“This is my commandment,” Jesus tells his disciples, “that you love one another, as I have loved you,” and to “abide in my love”. “Abide” comes from the Germanic word *bīdan*, meaning “to remain or stay”, and connotes not simply an action, but a state of living and being. It is a stronger idea than an instruction, but a way of life. The Greek word used is *menó* (μένω), whose meaning is very similar. John’s gospel uses this word many times, including in the first chapter when John the Baptizer says of the one who will follow him “you shall see the Spirit descending and abiding on Him” (that is, Jesus).

In addition to the words used, the language of commandment itself is deliberate; the author of John’s gospel is making an explicit reference to God as law-giver to accomplish at least two purposes: to affirm Jesus’ divine mandate, and to help readers to understand the weight given to loving one another. The law was given to Moses as a gift – the gift of a loving God who desires the best for God’s people. The requirements of the law are not a test that will be graded at the end of life; they are “requirements” for a life lived in God.

Jesus’ commandment to love functions in the same way. The commandment is not expressed as “love each other, or else.” Instead, Jesus reminds his followers that he has loved them, and they are to love one another in the same way – offering themselves to one another with humility, vulnerability, respect, and delight. In John’s gospel, Jesus embodies his commandment by washing his disciples’ feet before they eat together; he takes on the role of a servant. This makes it abundantly clear that his command to love is not about a particular feeling, but about a kind of action. In order to obey Jesus’ commandment to love, his followers have to *do* something, not simply *feel* something. He is not simply giving instructions as a teacher, but also directions as a guide. To live a life in God, to make manifest the Kingdom of Heaven, the disciples—and by extension we—must love one another.

The early church history found in the Book of Acts gives us story after story of the earliest followers of Jesus working out how to obey this commandment. As the stories of Acts unfold, it becomes gradually apparent that the first Christians are challenged, over and over, by the Spirit of God to reach past their ordinary boundaries to share the love of the risen Christ with people they did not expect. Apparently, when Jesus commanded them to love one another, he really meant everybody: eunuchs, Greeks, women, and even the Roman oppressors, which brings us to today’s story from Acts.

In today's lesson, we hear the very end of the story of Peter's encounter with Cornelius, a Roman centurion. It's a story you've heard before in the lectionary cycle: Peter is praying on the roof, when he has a vision of a sheet full of unclean animals in the sky, and hears a voice telling him to get up, kill something, and eat it. In the meantime, Cornelius, who is described as a God-fearing man, also has a vision while he is praying, a vision that prompts him to send some of his men to fetch Peter.

Peter's experience of the voice from heaven, telling him not to judge things as unclean that God has deemed clean, prepares him to go meet with Cornelius. It's difficult to overstate what a challenge this must have been for Peter; his culture and his religion both told him that going to the home of a gentile was both wrong and a little nauseating (making him ritually unclean). Peter must do something that is completely contrary to what he feels in order to obey the heavenly vision.

Peter manages to go to Cornelius and tell him about Jesus, or at least begin to. No sooner does he begin to speak than the Holy Spirit comes upon Cornelius and his household, and Peter is forced to realize that, though he *thought* he was making a big concession by agreeing to visit this gentile at his home, and though he *thought* he was bringing the Good News like a gift, and though perhaps he *thought* he had the upper hand, God's Spirit bypassed everything he assumed to be the case and came upon Cornelius and his household in a powerful and unmistakable way. Somehow, Peter must acknowledge this experience of the Spirit at work in people who look, speak, and eat differently from him.

What is also fascinating about today's story from Acts (which functions a bit like a mini-Pentesost) is the symmetry this creates with our celebration of Eucharist. The early Christian Jewish community is confronting two separate biases and prohibitions: visiting the home of a Gentile and eating a meal together. Both were forbidden for Jews and would make them ritually unclean, and Peter and Cornelius' separate visions combined, and Peter's response to them, show God's instruction to open the circle and erase distinctions ("There is neither Jew nor Greek..."). In fact I would argue the fact that the early Jesus Movement survived its infancy could be attributed to this very decision to respond to the Spirit's prompting in this way. And our celebration of Holy Eucharist itself is a reflection of and result of this ideal, welcoming everyone and gathering without distinction at God's table to share in the One Body and Blood of our Savior.

This is the continuing challenge of the church—our continuing challenge—as we work to heed Jesus' commandment to love one another. It is human nature to want to draw a circle around us and maintain boundaries that define who is part of us, and who is not. It is the Spirit's nature to push us past our borders and ask us to grow. If there's a surefire test for whether the Spirit is prompting us or not, it's this: if we think we are called to shrink our boundaries, include fewer people, be more selective in who we include, we can be quite confident that those impulses do not come from God. God's desire, embodied for us in Jesus and demonstrated for us by the early church, is that we expand our understanding, make the effort to love people who are not like us, and to accept with grace the fact that our vision of God and God's Kingdom is

necessarily limited. We need others to broaden our perspective, and to experience more abundantly and abide in the fullness of the Kingdom of Heaven. Any by contrast, when we exclude others, we diminish the Kingdom of Heaven.

As Peter discovered when he went to the home of Cornelius, none of us can claim to have exclusive access to God's truth, God's Spirit, or God's love. We each have a piece of the puzzle, and others – people who likely don't look like us, talk like us, love like us, pray like us, or vote like us – have other pieces. God is bigger than we are—and by definition—not comprehensible in full by humans. It takes all our puzzle pieces—and more—to begin to comprehend the awesome reality of the Holy abiding among us.

There is a humility required of us if we are going to manage to love one another as we are commanded to do. If a person believes that they have all the answers, that person has no need of community, except perhaps to make them feel superior. If, however, we understand ourselves to be *limited* beings, loving an *unlimited* God, we can choose to seek God wherever God might be found – in the least *and* the greatest, in the communities of which we are a part, and outside their borders. We might find ourselves stretching our boundaries, take the trouble personally and in community, to include multiple voices, harmonizing the same theme: love God, and love one another.

The lesson, my friends, is simply this. As the saying goes, I have good news and bad news: The good news is that Jesus loves everyone, *no exceptions*. The bad news is that Jesus loves *everyone*, no exceptions. Everything else is, as they say, is simply commentary.

The medieval mystics who contemplated the astonishing love of Jesus that we are commanded to embody found a perfect image to talk about it: they described Jesus as our mother. Anselm of Canterbury, a major theologian of the 11th century whose work dealt with such weighty questions as proving God's existence and atonement theory, wrote: "Jesus, as a mother you gather your people to you; you are gentle with us as a mother with her children." He goes on to compare Jesus' agony on the cross to the labor pains of a woman giving birth.

Jesus commands us to love one another as he has loved us. And the way he has loved us is with the sacrificial love a mother bears for her children – all her children. Like the early church, we are still caught up in the question about just whom we are called to love, just who belongs; but Jesus has no such questions. Elsewhere in John's gospel, Jesus puts it this way: "I, when I am lifted up, will draw *all* people to myself." No asterisks, postscripts, or exceptions.

We are one, despite all our pretending otherwise. And somehow, we are also each unique. What we can learn from Peter and Cornelius is that not only are we in equal need of God's love and grace, but we also need one another so that our vision of that grace can expand. Each person we meet and each person who meets us brings something to the party. We are called by this story to step over borders and push through boundaries. We are called to seek commonalities, to respect and honor differences, to look for the spirit of God at work in

the lives of people who are not like us, to push ourselves to give and receive hospitality as a sign of the reign of God, where all are called to the table by God's grace.

So. We are led, inevitably, to the table. In the Eucharist, we meet the risen Christ whose ongoing presence continues to fracture and remake the world of our understanding. We also meet each other, and the bread and wine are signs for us of that deep unity that undergirds and precedes all our differences. In the self-offering of Jesus, we find a model for the kind of self-offering we are called to do, across the boundaries that divide us. Every meal we eat, every bit of hospitality we offer, every encounter with the unknown in another reminds us of God's deep, abiding grace that abides in us, and binds us, despite our differences, into one body.

Here is Anselm again:

“Lord Jesus, in your mercy, heal us;
In your love and tenderness, remake us.
In your compassion, bring grace and forgiveness,
For the beauty of heaven, may your love prepare us.”

Returning to the Jesus instruction that we must abide in his love, and the commitment we have to God, to Jesus, and one another in community. One of the ways that I serve this community is as usher, which requires me to count the number present on Sunday morning. A year ago when Caro+ retired, that number was reliably forty-five, and six months ago thirty-five. Some Sundays recently it has been twenty-five, and I have wondered at the start of service if there would be a dozen of us (bless the latecomers!).

There are of course practical reasons that folks might not be at church. Some have been recovering from surgery, traveling abroad, visiting family, or taking a Sunday off for self-care. And some participate and join online. *And* some are simply choosing to come less often.

I can imagine many reasons. Maybe some have been frustrated with the experience of recorded music during worship. This was particularly painful for me. But thanks be to God, we were patient and God brought Paul (and Joy!) to us, and we are thankful for their ministry to and among us now. Maybe some have found having a variety of preaching voices jarring, or the occasional Sundays without Eucharist unsatisfying. Maybe some have enjoyed the potlucks less and have found the particular offerings less to their liking. Maybe some feel like the service they are doing outside of Sunday morning is “enough”. I suspect many of us have found the grief at all the change and loss over the past year simply difficult. I have personally felt all of these things at times. These are all reasonable and normal *feelings*.

But the love we are commanded by Jesus to abide in isn't simply about feelings. It is about being, acting, and doing. The vibrancy and connection, the heart of this church, happens through our encounter with God and one another. It happens through singing, through hearing God's word together, through teaching, through fellowship, through our care for one another,

and most of all, through the amazing mystical encounter we have with Christ and with one other as we gather in the circle of Eucharist.

As the Prayer Book reminds us, “Open our eyes to see your hand at work in the world about us. Deliver us from the presumption of coming to this Table for solace only, and not for strength; for pardon only, and not for renewal.”

I also feel an ethical and practical concern here. As we move into the next phase of our search process and interview candidates, we have an obligation to them to be transparent about how the parish is doing in transition. We have accomplished many remarkable things over the past year. But we are also, at least on Sunday mornings, increasingly fewer in number. How will they respond to this information?

My purpose here isn't to guilt anyone into coming to church or coming to church more. And of course I'm preaching to the proverbial choir this morning. This isn't about a feeling, but about active commitment. It is also what Caro+ herself asked us to do a year ago when she preached her final sermons as Rector of this church.

God is very present and at work at St. Benedict's, and I am excited to see what she has in store for us in the coming months and years. How can we find new resolve to continue to abide in Jesus' love, to continue—together and present—in the risen life of our Savior?

Amen.