
Love is Hard

A sermon by Canon Lauren Holder
Easter 5 – Year C

I had contemplated earlier this week asking everyone to open their pew Bibles to the thirteenth chapter of John this morning. But I don't want to put anyone on the spot who didn't grow up doing Bible drills in the Baptist Church. So instead I'll just point out that there is a Bible in every pew—it's the darker red book—and the Gospel of John is about three-quarter's in.

I bring this up because our Gospel reading today is only five verses long, and it ends with the “new commandment” Jesus gives his disciples—that they love one other—just as Jesus loves. But to understand what Jesus means when he says “just as I have loved you,” it's helpful to remember the context of this commandment. It's helpful to remember that this chapter begins with Jesus washing the disciples feet, followed by Jesus foretelling Judas' betrayal, followed by this new commandment, and then followed by Jesus foretelling Peter's denial. All of that in one chapter, and we only get five verses of it. So what has Jesus taught us about love in this chapter alone? That it looks like serving others, it looks difficult and dirty, and it looks like loving even those who may betray you or deny you.

Today's lectionary sets the scene by saying, “when Judas had gone out,” but if you forget the broader context of this passage, you might think he has just run out to pick up some olive oil. No, he has left to alert the authorities of Jesus' whereabouts so that Jesus can be arrested and killed. *But not before Jesus knowingly washes Judas' feet.*

I like looking at this commandment to love alongside our lesson from Acts. Because that story isn't just about circumcision or food or even gentiles. It's about our natural proclivity to size people up, to see how they compare to us, to ask the question aloud or in the quiet corners of our heart: ‘are they in or are they out.’ It's about our desire to break bread with people who will affirm our stance on this issue or that, reminding us that we really are as enlightened as we think we are. It's about our willingness to volunteer or give money to causes in line with our beliefs and priorities, so that we can feel good about serving the segment of the community we care about. It's about our shutting down conversations with people who offend us because, they will never come around to our point of view. And it's about our professing to be an open and welcoming family or church or neighborhood—as long as the new folks walking in the door are willing to conform to our status-quo.

I don't know. Maybe I'm the only one who struggles with these examples. You know the preacher is always preaching to herself.

But Jesus said, “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”

He said, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

And the voice from heaven says to Peter—not once, but three times—“What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”

And the Holy Spirit says, “not to make a distinction between them and us.”

So I just want to say to all of us gathered here this morning, myself included, that LOVE IS HARD. Not all the time, of course. Some love comes easily and naturally and quickly—and I love that kind of love. But if we are to call ourselves followers of Jesus, it's going to take a lot more than going to church on Sunday, and being supportive of our friends, and praying for the people we love—even though all those things are good and lovely things to do and we should do them. Because we are good and lovely people.

But that Jesus-follower-love is something else. It's going to church on Sunday so you can look for unfamiliar faces and strike up awkward conversations. It's being supportive of the stranger who hasn't showered in a week and you're hoping won't make eye contact with you. It's praying for the person you can't even be in the same room with—either because of what they stand for or because of what they have done to you.

Jesus says “love your enemies” and I don't really want to. He washes the feet of those who betray and deny him, then tells us to love like that. And most days I feel like that's asking a little too much. Sure, I want to be the kind of person who can love her enemies and serve others without distinction, sometimes. But most days—every day—I fall short.

I wish I had some kind of 5-step plan to love like Jesus so that we could all walk out of here and change the world together. But a 5-step plan would take away from the truth I've just tried to name: that LOVE IS HARD. And there is no formula to change that truth—no sugar to help the medicine go down.

Instead, I want you to notice every time love is hard this week for you. Notice when you have uncharitable thoughts about a particular Facebook acquaintance or public figure or family member, and say to yourself “love is hard.” Notice when you are choosing the option that requires the least of you—perhaps with very good reason—and say to yourself “love is hard.” Notice when someone treats you with contempt instead of kindness—and say to yourself “love is hard.” Just start with that. Just notice the truth, and name it. Realizing that every time you name it, that God sees you and God hears you—like a prayer you're not ready to pray yet.

And the God who loves you so much more than any of us can ask or imagine will hold you in the palm of those almighty hands and say, “I know.”