Sermon **Acts 11.1-18**
May 19, 2019 **Psalm 148**
Easter 5C **Revelation 21.1-16**
The Rev. Gary R. Brower, PhD **John 13.31-35**

On this fifth Sunday after Easter, our lectionary—the guide for reading Scripture throughout the year—has us return to the night before Jesus died, to Maundy Thursday, to that night when Jesus gave his disciples a new commandment, a new mandate: that they should love one another as Jesus had loved them. By this apparently unusual affection, all—everyone—would see and know that they were Jesus' disciples. I've puzzled over this reading for some time, wondering why this command was so "new", as well as what is the nature of this "love", that by practicing it, or giving evidence of it, everyone would see it as a mark of Jesus' disciples.

To answer that puzzlement, I had to read the passage in the broader context of John's Gospel. One of the characteristics of that gospel is that it is set in, or at least reflective of, an environment of conflict. We see this at the outset, in that great poetic prologue, where we read that the Word became flesh and came to its own—that is, the Jewish people, and its own didn't receive him. Throughout the Gospel thereafter Jesus and his disciples are found to be in opposition with "the Jews", even though Jesus and his disciples <u>were</u> Jews. The conflict that was the backdrop for John's Gospel, then, is apparently between Jesus and his followers, on the one hand, and those were don't follow Jesus, on the other. Or, between those who accepted Jesus' messiahship and those who did not. Or, between the Word's own that <u>didn't</u> receive it, and some alternate, or sub-, group that did.

To this subgroup, Jesus gave this "new" commandment: love one another, just as I have loved you . . . loving one another is a mark of my disciples. Why is this "new"? The synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark and Luke—all report Jesus tying together two "old" commands: loving God with one's whole being (from Deuteronomy) and loving one's neighbor as oneself (from Leviticus). Loving God and loving neighbor . . . easy enough. So why is "loving one another" so different from these, so novel? The answer at which <u>I've</u> arrived has to do with the context I mentioned earlier: this conflict between those who accept Jesus' messiahship and those who don't. And this answer requires a somewhat broader interpretation than we might normally employ.

We've heard this passage—"love one another as I have loved you"—so often, and set in the context of Maundy Thursday, that I think we've domesticated it a bit too much. In that upper room, Jesus washed his disciples' feet, telling them that this action was an example for them, that they, too, should act as servants. After Judas' departure, he followed the foot-washing with this "new commandment", implying that "loving one another" is the appropriate imitation of Jesus own' actions: "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." There seems to be a connection between Jesus' action and the disciples' imitation. Jesus serves; disciples are to serve. Jesus loves; disciples are to love.

This doesn't seem too novel, perhaps. Especially if we read it in the context of the conflict in John. For if the disciples are to band together in a situation of persecution, then serving each other and loving each other would provide the kind of internal cohesion that would allow them to survive. And if a new body of people is actually constituted around service to each other and love for each other, that might be a fairly unique group—remarkable to the outside world for that behavior.

Assuming, for the moment, then, that this is the desired outcome of the "new commandment", then, without much work, we can look around and see how far short we have fallen from that ideal. Those who "own the faith of Jesus", as an old hymn puts it, seem often to be overly protective of that possession. In other words, folks who call themselves Christians are often an exclusive lot, loving only those who belong to the same upper-room cadre as themselves. Loving one another is relatively easy in that circumstance. But, we know that Christians do <u>not</u> always, or even often, love other Christians. We've seen that in any number of scandals that have rocked Christian denominations. We see it in the actions of Westboro Baptist Church. And we seen it recently in the broader political news, as certain self-identified "Christians" question whether Mayor Buttigieg's <u>Episcopalianism</u> is really "Christian".

Dealing with disagreements within the body of Christ can present significant challenges to us. At a clergy-and-spouse luncheon last Friday, Presiding Bishop Michael Curry told a story bout a challenge he faced immediately after assuming his role in 2015. The same General Convention that elected Bp. Curry had also passed a resolution extending the rite of marriage to same-sex couples, which many, more conservative, Anglican bodies felt was a departure from orthodox doctrine. Bp. Curry then had to attend a gathering of

the Primates—the leaders of various national branches of the Anglican Communion—and was immediately put to the test.

The discussions around that issue weren't easy. Questions of doctrine and practice were pitted against each other. And, you may recall, there were some "sanctions" that were placed on the Episcopal Church by other Anglican jurisdictions. Bp. Curry told us, however, that, at the close of that gathering, he wrote a letter to the Primates stating that, while he disagreed with their conclusions, he would continue to be in conversation with them, to foster understanding. The bonds of love demanded that.

The key to my understanding of our Gospel reading, then, is found in the phrase "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" (13.34b). "Just as I have loved you." Jesus loved his followers. He taught them. He washed their feet. Ultimately he died for them — even the difficult, doubtful, denying, ones. The disciples accepted him, trusted in him, followed him. But God's Son came not just for a that small group; Jesus told his disciples that he had other sheep elsewhere! And his desire was that all would be one flock, under one Shepherd (10.16). And, of course, earlier in John's gospel we have those familiar verses, creating an even larger sheepfold: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son . . . . in order that the world might be saved through him" (3.16, 17).

Jesus' love for us—God's love for us—is broader than a love for small groups of believers alone. For us to love one another, it seems to me, is a command to love indiscriminately, as Jesus did—even in the face of opposition. If we can love outside our small "tribe", then that truly is unusual—that would be remarkable to others. But we have so often domesticated, or parochialized, God's love, that we "love" our in-group and, at most, just peacefully coexist with others.

Tribalism was clearly something that Peter, too, had to address. In our reading from Acts, Peter adopted for himself God's charge to Israel—that is, "to be a light to the Gentiles" (Acts 13.47//Is 49.6). He understood his role to be that of taking a message that had been limited by a group's self-understanding to a wider audience. No longer was God to be seen as parochial, but universal. No longer was there a distinction between clean and unclean. The problem was, however, that the original "tribe" wanted to keep its god for itself—not much different now than then.

Jesus' command that night before he died was new; it was a command to go beyond tribal borders, yes. But Israel had had that charge. Jesus charged his followers to love beyond the tribal borders, to lay down their own self-interest for those beyond the immediate flock, but still within the Good Shepherd's larger sheepfold. We don't know who is invited to the Lamb's marriage supper (or in the context of today, the Lamb's picnic); we assume it us. But the guest list is in God's hands. God draws the boundaries—I'm certain more widely than do we. God invites folks to the party—probably more than we would like. BecauseGod's Son died for all, was raised for all . . . not just for us.

In that context—in that light—Jesus' charge to his disciples was a new commandment: "Love one another as I have loved you". No one else really does that. And when we do, others will see and marvel, and know that we are Jesus' disciples. And they just might say, "I want some of that!"

Amen.