

Yr. C, Easter 5
May 6, 2007
Preached by Furman Buchanan
St. Martins in the Fields
1617 words

Lessons:
Psalm 145
Acts 13:44-52
Revelation 19:1, 4-9
John 13:31-35

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”¹ I speak to you in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

A month ago on Easter Sunday the women and men who followed Jesus got shocking news of resurrection—thanks be to God. Three weeks ago, Thomas asked for more proof, and he got it—thanks be to Jesus. Two weeks ago, seven of the disciples got a record catch of fish, and a free breakfast on top of that—once again, thanks to Jesus. Last week, we all got a good shepherd who calls us each by name and offers eternal life—once again, thanks to Jesus. And today, there is a profound shift in this Easter pattern. We all get a new commandment—“love one another, just as I have loved you.”

As we get closer and closer to the Feast of Pentecost, the focus shifts from all the wonderful and dazzling things that *Jesus* has done to all the wonderful and dazzling things that Jesus commands *us* to do as members of his legacy; members of his Body. On this 5th Sunday of Easter, we get our marching orders: love one another just like Jesus. This is not warm and fuzzy, feel-good love. This is sacrificial, I-am-willing-to-die-for-you love.

And so my question is this—who did you die for this week? On whose account did you sacrifice something really valuable—I’m talking about a big chunk of your valuable time, or an absurdly generous gift of your hard-earned money, or a sacrifice of some special priority in your life put on hold for someone else’s sake, or the sacrifice of risking a valuable relationship by speaking a hard or painful truth.

This is not a rhetorical question. As far as I can tell, Jesus did not give a rhetorical commandment. He laid his big, bold expectation right there on the center of the dinner table for everyone to ponder. I imagine there was a profound, uncomfortable silence at that table. (Silence)

Why would Jesus ask his closest followers to do the impossible? Why does Jesus ask us to do the impossible? Jesus himself says, “Where I am going, you cannot come.” Nevertheless, he leaves us with this new commandment—love one another, just as I have loved you.

I had two experiences this week that help illustrate why Jesus gives us such a challenging commandment. They both involved death and resurrection. And they both happened because people who claim Jesus as their Lord were willing to take a chance on this bold, risky commandment to love as Jesus loves.

The first one was a funeral. As with many funerals, there was a measure of unfinished family business. There were relationships that were broken—even dead. There were relationships that needed a miraculous transformation—relationships that needed resurrection.

¹ John 13:34

The temptation of a preacher in this circumstance is to gloss over the reality of brokenness and death and avoid upsetting the survivors any more than they already are. The temptation of family members at the time of death is to be themselves, only moreso—and in cases where there are broken relationships this usually means digging in one’s heels and just getting through the whole mess. Against these temptations, Christ calls us to love one another, just as he loved us.

The preacher did not gloss over the truth. He unequivocally named the brokenness and death, and he essentially placed this new commandment right there in the center of the family for everyone to ponder. In other words, the preacher was willing to risk taking the heat that often accompanies such hard truth-telling for the sake of love.

The family then responded in kind. Brokenness, bitterness and even death were transformed as children were able and willing to truly mourn the death of their parent and to stand together and share the hard and necessary work of burying what was dead and holding on to what was alive—holding on to resurrection. “All we go down to the dust; yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.”²

My second experience of this challenging commandment came in a conversation with several other clergy over lunch. It also involved death and resurrection, and the willingness of people who claim Jesus as their Lord to take a chance on this bold, audacious commandment to love as Jesus loves.

More than one pastor spoke about ways in which they had recently found themselves in situations of major strife within their congregations. I’m not talking about mildly irritating (or sometimes amusing) complaints about one’s sermons. I’m talking about blatant deception, unvarnished hatefulness attempts to triangulate associate pastors, and deep, intentionally-inflicted wounds. I’m talking about the kind of verbal and political violence that leaves truly faithful people wondering not only about their *congregations*, but about the futility of proclaiming the words of Jesus when he says, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”³

One of the pastors read a story from a book by the Rev. Will Campbell. It was a story about Will’s seminary classmate, Jonathan Myrick Daniels, who was murdered in cold blood in Alabama for standing peacefully alongside a black girl in the midst of the civil rights movement. Daniels is one of the saints in our Episcopal calendar of saints.

Will Campbell wrestled not only with the violent death of his friend, but also about the futility of proclaiming the words of Jesus when he says, “love one another, just as I have loved you”—especially when talking about some wretched bigot who shot one of the most peaceful and gentle people he had ever known.

There was a long, profound silence at our table. Finally, someone observed of the pastor sitting next to us—still bloodied from verbal and political violence in his congregation, “You haven’t run away.” In other words, “You’re still loving these people, aren’t you?” For me, it was another resurrection sighting—new and transformed life sprouting forth, even in places where blood is still on the floor.

Why does Jesus tell us to do what seems impossible—to love as he has loved us? Because he has shown us that resurrection—something *else* that seems impossible—is the natural result of this

² Book of Common Prayer, p. 482-483.

³ John 13:35

bold, audacious and risky sort of love. Jesus commanded his followers to follow his lead because he wanted nothing less than for them *and us* to experience and participate in resurrection life.

When we speak about resurrection life, we need to recognize a couple of things about what the resurrection is and what it is not.

First, the resurrection was *not* about proving to the world that Jesus was Divine.⁴ For those of us who believe in the divinity of Jesus, his resurrection certainly stands at the center of our faith. But for Jesus, the resurrection appears to have had much more to do with revealing to his closest friends and followers what regular old life with God is like. Otherwise, he would have appeared to the political and religious authorities of the world—Pilate, Herod, and the Jewish leaders who sentenced him to death.

Instead, Jesus appeared in ordinary ways walking with friends, eating meals, serving breakfast on the beach of Lake Tiberius. This resurrected life was not easy to recognize right off the bat, even for Jesus' closest friends. Yet, when these friends and followers could finally see *and believe* that the love of God was so near and accessible to them, then they were able to identify familiar scars or patterns.

As miraculous as Jesus' resurrection was in and of itself, what seemed even more impossible (and yet what was undeniably real) was the disciples' own personal, immediate, and powerful access to the love of God in Christ Jesus. After 2000 years, it is no different. Jesus' resurrection still seems miraculous, but what seems even more impossible for us to accept is our own personal, immediate, and powerful access—and responsibility—for the love of God in Christ.

Second, the resurrection is not fundamentally about life after death. To think about Jesus' resurrection as a personal ticket to heaven after you die is to utterly disregard all that Jesus said and did in various appearances among his friends and followers after his resurrection. You see, Jesus resurrection *was* a reality—and *is* a reality—for his followers *before* their deaths.

Once again, I believe this is because the purpose of the resurrection was *not* to prove who Jesus was so much as it was to reveal what surprising, intimate, wonder-filled and loving life with God really is—right then and there, right here and right now.

If you want to claim the power and reality of Christ's resurrection in your life and in the life of other people, then take Jesus at his word—love one another as he loved us—and watch what happens. I can tell you, because I saw resurrection twice this week, all within a few miles of this pulpit.

Loving one another as Jesus loved us is not easy to do. In fact, it is risky business. If you pay attention to the Gospels, then you will know that even faithful friends may not initially understand what you are talking about or what you are doing. But God knows that resurrection life flows naturally from sacrificial love.

And God not only longs for us to know this, God longs for us to *live* this. “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” Amen.

⁴ Although this is not precisely the claim of Eugene Peterson, the sense of this section of the sermon was inspired by my recent reading of his book, *Living the Resurrection: The Risen Christ in Everyday Life* (Colorado Springs, CO:Navpress, 2006).