

Sixth Sunday of Easter

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Introduction

Jesus is preparing his disciples for the time after his death. As we dig deeper we see the importance of the message and the reason why Jesus is using what seems to be very authoritarian language. This is to do with the cost of loving, the impact of loving and the fruit that this brings. It is about the mission that Jesus is calling his disciples to beyond his death and resurrection. It is about the transformational nature of love.

Text

John 15:9–17

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

Comment

Loving in a caring relationship, and loving in a difficult relationship are in many ways the same thing – love surely is just that, love. And yet the ease at which love is shown and enacted, the emotions that accompany this, and the consequences of this love can be vastly different. Jesus had a unique and positive relationship with his Father, one on which he could model himself. A picture of two divine beings who love inter-dependently. Loving others with whom there is a mutually healthy relationship becomes a way of being. A command to love in this context is most natural – both parties displaying respect, grace and care for each other, and the

authoritarian nature of the command is easier to sit with.

Jesus shows us what he means by this love in calling the disciples 'friends' – effectively freeing the disciples from being slaves. Jesus tells them that in the past he has called them 'servants', or in the Greek 'slaves' – and release from slavery usually came at a cost. This is laying down ones' life for another – the cost of restoring equality of power in a relationship, the cost of becoming equal.

Yet Jesus didn't just relate to and love those who returned his love. In John 13 we read that Jesus gives his dipped bread to Judas – the disciple who was about to betray him. What is remarkable is that this act of giving dipped bread to another was reserved for deep friendship. We see Jesus enacting what he is speaking about – to love one another, and it came at great cost. For Jesus this was in the midst of great turmoil and anguish when his spirit was troubled with the knowledge of his impending death.

Jesus makes a choice to love Judas by remaining in a close relationship with a disciple who was about to become a traitor, an enemy, whose actions lead to violence and death. By giving his dipped bread to Judas he was addressing power imbalances. Jesus was becoming equal to Judas. In discussing violence, John Paul Lederach speaks about a web of relationships, with activities linked to patterns of behaviour that may give rise to destructive or constructive actions. He states, 'the well-being of our grandchildren is directly tied to the well-being of our enemy's grandchildren'.* The consequences of loving in a mutually healthy relationship enables the continuing growth of trust and mutual respect. The consequences of loving an enemy can lead to a constructive change in a web of relationships which is transformative, producing fruit that is long-lasting, fruit for the generations to come.

The act of loving can move a relationship from a place of turmoil and hate to a place of conversation – of understanding, of valuing the other. This relationship allows for the naming and addressing of difficult topics and issues. To have a deep enough love, respect and freedom to say what needs to be said, to hear the other person. Of living well with difference. This is love.

And yet the words of Jesus to love each other can also be misunderstood, and may be used by some to control and keep another living within a fearful relationship, putting demands on the other where choice is not an option. In this relationship, the commandment to 'love one another as I have loved you,' and the statement, 'No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends,' do not sit so easily. For those in these more challenging relationships, loving might be more difficult to show, and any 'love' that is shown back is shrouded in fear, a relationship where one party controls another so that self-esteem is all but destroyed; where there is a controlling imbalance in the dynamics of power. This is not the love that Jesus is talking about. To love in this situation may mean moving to a place of safety and healing. 1 John 4:18 says, 'there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.'

Jesus is advocating loving the self, loving our friends, loving our enemies. He advocates this because hate breeds hate. To hate impacts the one who hates. In Matthew's gospel we read of loving our enemies and praying for those who persecute us (Matthew 5:44). To hate destroys the person who hates. Hate is an attitude and an action that drives bitterness, resentment and prejudice into our soul. It turns a person from love and towards self-centred desire. There is no transformation in hate. And so Jesus simply instructs, 'Love each other'.

* John Paul Lederach, 'The Moral Imagination'; Oxford University Press (2005), page 35.

Response

To love may be a journey – at times a difficult one to walk, with an unclear path and a way that has not been marked by others. And yet it is often the journey itself that gives rise to actions of love: to walk with the one we find difficult; to listen when tired and over-stretched; to seek out another perspective; to find a way to have that challenging conversation so that the elephant is no-longer in the room; to simply be in relationship with another to encourage, to care, to understand.

At times we might need to accept the outstretched hand of a friend, stranger, or enemy; to receive love with grace and humility; to be prepared to let go of old hurts rather than live with a conflict that has now become normal.

Spend some time in quiet reflection.

Who are you called to love today? What will that look like?

What past hurts and conflicts should you lay down in order to move towards a new world of love and restoration?

Make a commitment to show love to someone today that you find challenging.

Prayer

Love felt in the wind against the face,
In the colour of bluebells emerging into spring.
Love radiates in the water's reflection,
All the while a love song swirls from the birds of the air.

Scarpering lambs that do not trust
A collapse in the path that is navigated around
Boulders to climb conveying the cost of loving
The steep uphill unforgiving in distance.

Out here in the open I see Your love abound
God, take me on a journey
to love in the tranquil
To learn how to love in the trial
To love just as Jesus
So that love echoes around.

