

ASTOUNDED BY JOY
JOHN 15:9-17, ACTS 10:44-48
MAY 10, 2015
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Our Gospel lesson this morning carries us back to the words of love. In the past six weeks, we have been encouraged, challenged, and commanded to love as God loves, as Jesus loves, as we would want to be loved. Again today we hear:

⁹As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

¹² 'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵I 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. ¹⁶You 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. ¹⁷I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

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We've talked about this already, right? And we've told the children in our midst that we have to keep talking about loving each other because we forget, and we become unloving, and we need these words from Jesus to somehow become real to us because we know that we are capable of some pretty rotten feelings and actions. Love God and love each other. We know. We get it. We could do better. But are all of these reminders really necessary?

Let's think about the challenges to love that face us because Jesus' words are final orders to his followers and not sentimental suggestions around a campfire. Jesus knows it is exceedingly difficult to love someone whom you judge and from whom you sense some kind of barrier or distance. What could that mean for us? This happens in little ways that we chuckle about: LSU, Alabama, Auburn...Saints, Cowboys, Patriots...public school, private school, North Shore or West Bank, Uptown or Quarter, Orleans or Jefferson, SUV or Prius. Many little allegiances and ways of living begin to put us in camps, and it often follows that we enjoy spending more times in those camps than not. That's not quite what Jesus is addressing, but it gets us thinking in the right direction. It gets trickier. And messier. And harder to laugh off.

We're entering a season that highlights divisions even further.

Mike Huckabee has thrown his hat into the ring for the GOP candidacy as we turn our eyes (roll our eyes?) to yet another presidential cycle. Hillary Clinton made her campaign official just three weeks prior to Huckabee. Then there's Jeb Bush and Ben Carson and Rand Paul and Ted Cruz and Bernie Sanders and Jim Webb and a host of others who will emerge on our news feeds sooner than we'd like.

Have you picked a side? Do you know who you're backing? Do you know who you absolutely can't abide? Have you figured out who will destroy our way of life and everything good about this country?

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

How in the world are we going to manage such a feat? Surely Jesus didn't include the 18 months leading up to a presidential election.

You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.

He's persistent, isn't he. Maybe a little repetitive. Maybe a little wishful in his thinking. Maybe a little overly confident in our ability to really love across the lines that divide us.

Conversations on race, protests in Baltimore, a decision on who can be legally married in Louisiana coming soon from the Supreme Court, a response from Louisiana's governor on how people can define and practice religious freedom, a Planned Parenthood facility still waiting to be constructed on Claiborne Avenue, lingering praise for and resentments of Obamacare.

Where do you stand? Who stands with you? Who is against you? Who is on *my* side and who is on *their* side? How can we persuade and argue, how can we defend and fight?

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. ¹¹I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

This doesn't feel comfortable, does it. To name the divisions that face us *out there* in the space of worship *in here* sometimes unnerves us...maybe even angers us. Because what we usually do in church is mumble the Gospel call to love (*love one another as I have loved you*) as we avoid eye contact with the ones we have a hard time loving. We remember that Jesus gave the mandate that everyone who follows him will be known for the ways they love each other, and he said these words as he broke bread and poured wine and prepared to lay down his life for his friends.

Sometimes we remember those words as we gather around our table here and break bread and pass the cup, and we do so even when we're standing beside someone whom we judge without knowing and whose worldview we don't respect.

I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

Then Jesus continues in verse 18, “If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. ¹⁹If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world—therefore the world hates you.”

The text is old, but the cultural divisions are not. The kind of love that Jesus describes pushes back against a world that tells us we have to pick sides. The kind of love Jesus lived out pulls up the dividing lines that we have so carefully arranged and ordered our lives around. The kind of love Jesus shows throws a party, sets a banquet table, washes the feet of beloved friends, and calls us all to joy.

The world does not understand this way, Jesus says. Battle lines, culture wars, red and blue, petty and monumental differences don’t have the last say in this community of love.

Presbyterian minister Meda Stamper notes of our three-year worship cycle, “The lectionary never gives us the resistance and hate of John 15:18,” and that’s to our interpretive detriment as, “the missing verses matter for us because it is only against the backdrop of the world’s hate that the radical nature of God’s love is revealed in its fullest glory. And it is into such a world that Jesus’ own are sent to testify and bear fruit, to love as Jesus loves.”¹

I joked Wednesday night that my love-language is walking into difficult conversations that no one really wants to have. It’s true that I have long been a person drawn to issues of justice and community, ways of division and the challenges of unity. But I have a vested interest in asking how diverse faith communities will thrive in the 21st century. As pastor of a congregation representing many different opinions, viewpoints, and life experiences, I am wondering daily how Jesus’ mandate to love shapes us as we hold that call to love above other allegiances.

There are different ways forward for churches right now. One is that we can set up camp with others just like us and let go of that nervous feeling that someone might say something that shocks or offends. Then we can pat ourselves on the back because all of us good folks found each other and called it a day.

We are never in short supply of staunchly conservative congregations with lists of “nos” and exclusions. These are churches where I wouldn’t be allowed to preach and am likely considered beyond the boundaries of Christianity because every Sunday I stand in opposition to the restrictions in the Epistles on women teaching and speaking before men in worship. It’s too cheap and overly-simplistic to caricature these sincere congregations, but we know there are many versions of that camp out there.

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2435

There is a growing movement of Christians who identify on the far left of the political spectrum and want to draw a line of certainty around their projects and stances, too. Solely progressive camps are also a reality, and in these camps a secretly conservative member may live in fear that she will be found out. Now I might personally identify with one of those groups more than I do with the other, but that is still not the way forward that intrigues me.

What intrigues me is the way of Christ's love. What does a vibrant, diverse, truth-telling, loving community really look like? Can we really hold tension around divisive, even volatile matters and still sit down at table together and delight in each other? Can we bless and love when we absolutely do not and will not agree? I believe we can.

Our first reading from Acts is an intriguing one to consider. Peter is talking about the resurrection and the first-hand experience he and the apostles had with Jesus:

42 He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. **43** All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

44 While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. **45** The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, **46** for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, **47** "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" **48** So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

Verse 45 in a few other translations reads:

The believing Jews who had come with Peter couldn't believe it, couldn't believe that the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out on "outsider" non-Jews, but there it was—they heard them speaking in tongues, heard them praising God. (The Message)

Peter's friends from Joppa—all of them Jewish, all circumcised—were stunned to see that the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on outsiders. (The Voice)

The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. (CEB)

One group thought their camp was the truest, best, most-right way of all the ways, and they were astounded to realize God didn't agree. God's ways are mysterious, God's imagination is bigger, and God's blessing for all people is abundant.

That can be a shocking, even horrifying realization: God's blessing is bigger than we understand. God's blessing is bigger than we want it to be. God's blessing is bigger than our feeble attempts at love, but chooses us to try to live in the way of love anyway. Think about that scene of spirit and baptism: Who might stun, astonish, astound us if we realized

God's blessing is on them, too? And how does that change our listening, our speaking, our reacting, our welcoming?

Remember you did not choose me, no, I have chosen you. We have been chosen as representatives of love.

"This matters," writes David Lose, "because IF it's finally up to us – to choose Jesus, to remain in him, to obey his commandments, ...or to choose joy, then we are lost. We simply don't do it. Maybe we can't. We can try, and there is something valiant and noble and important about trying.

The good news [is] that God [chooses] us. That God loves us. That God plans to use us to make this world God loves a better place. That can be hard to remember, especially after the events in Baltimore, Nepal, Nigeria...and more than likely any number of households in our own community.

Not that God's choosing us is a panacea, as if none of the difficulties of this life matter. Rather, knowing that God has chosen us, loves us, and will use us gives us the courage to face the challenges and renews our strength to do something about them. Ultimately, we cannot fix, let alone redeem, this world. That's why that's God's work. But knowing that God has promised to do so can provide us with the strength and energy to work to make the little corner of the world we live in a better place."²

Faith community challenges our ability to stay in divided camps because here we become one out of many. And that's the dream. That's the hope. It will not always be comfortable or smooth, but what fun would that be?! On this journey, may we find ourselves more committed to the way of love than we are to winning an argument.

When we're here in this room and out there in this world, may we cease to understand one another as enemies or opponents across battle lines. That's a cheap and easy way out of hard conversations and of actually living out the way of Jesus. Instead, pray we welcome the shock of engaging each other as followers of Christ's way who share the same blessing. May we be astounded by God's grace and God's imagination. And may that expansive love be made known right here through your lives.

Amen.

² <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/05/easter-6-b-on-being-chosen/>