

The Sixth Sunday of Easter (B), 6 May 2018
Saint Ignatius of Antioch Episcopal Church in the City of New York

O God, who hast prepared for those who love thee such good things as pass man's understanding: Pour into our hearts such love toward thee, that we, loving thee in all things and above all things, may obtain thy promises, which exceed all that we can desire; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Isaiah 45:11-13, 18-22

Acts 11:19-30

John 15:9-17

Last Sunday I talked about what it means to follow the Commandments of God. The Bible is full of instructions that we should follow God's commandments and often it sounds like we are called to mere docile obedience. Indeed, this is how many theologians and preachers have not only talked about it, but have instructed people on how to live their lives. We are to follow God because He (and usually in this case we really imagine a "he") says so. To our ears, however, much of this language, found both in Scripture and interpretation, sounds harsh and is problematic. And I have to say it sounds problematic for the reason that it is.

What I think is happening in Scripture is that human beings have been trying to concretise, using language, something that is hard to nail down, but none the less is something that they have experienced. I think in and through all the problematic, historically localised language and sensibilities (that we parrot at our peril) what we have been trying to understand is that we are in relationship with God. We know God and God knows us. What we are trying to understand and name is what real, mutual relationship based on knowledge one of the other feels like and should be like.

Relationship is messy, our human relationships are messy, and we use our human experience of relationship to talk about our relationship with God.

What we need to find, however, is language that expresses what a healthy relationship looks like, what real mutuality and love look like. One of the best places to start our search is the Gospel of John. John's gospel is all about mutuality and interconnection and the consequences of that kind of relationship for living our lives.

As I discussed last week, in Jesus' farewell discourse here in John, Jesus makes it very clear what the great commandment for him is: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." He couldn't get more explicit than that. What is wonderful about this unequivocal imperative is that he is not asking his disciples to do anything that he has not already done. Jesus has loved us, we know what his love looks like, we have felt it, and have our model in it. Jesus is asking no more of us than to return to the world what has already given us. This is not the capricious command of a despot, a "do as I say, not as I do." It is not asking us to believe in that which sounds fantastic. This is a commandment born of relationship and knowledge, a commandment, therefore, born of faith.

From their time with Jesus, the disciples already understand that God's love for them looks like the Good Shepherd who knows his flock and whose flock knows him; looks like the grace and inclusion shown to the woman at the well to whom Jesus promised Living Water; looks like the one who fed the five thousand with only five barley loaves and two fish, and in the process gave them himself, the bread of life. In

this moment, Jesus foreshadows what will happen to him as he moves towards his passion, death, and resurrection, to incarnating the community forming love he will show from the Cross: “Greater love has no [one] than this, that [one lays] down [their] life for [their] friends.” Love looks like putting ourselves in harm’s way for the sake of others, whether that harm is literal, bodily danger or the kind of vulnerability that accompanies standing with the marginalise and the oppressed, standing up to bullies, and speaking truth to power.

This is the vision of love that Jesus shares with his disciples and he makes it clear that this vision is of mutual love:

You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.

Jesus states unequivocally that he does not want his relationship with the disciples to be that of master and servant, master and slave. It is, rather, to be a healthy relationship in which the power dynamic is on a more even footing (as hard as that is for us to imagine about God). We are to be Jesus’ friends, not his staff. Friends love their friends for the sake of the other’s well being and not their own. Friends care for each other and experience joy and sorrow in equal measure as we share in each other’s lives.

Jesus wants us to continue in relationship with him and with each other and

pass along this community of friendship, he wants us to “go and bear fruit and that [our] fruit should abide; so that whatever [we] ask the Father in my name, he may give it to [us].” Now, I don’t expect that whatever I ask for, you know, like a million dollars falling from the sky into the collection plate, or world peace, will just happen if I ask for it. It doesn’t mean that there is anything deficient in my faith, my prayers, or in myself that when I wish for the moon I don’t get it. What Jesus is saying is that when we orient our prayers and action towards love, God will always answer us back with more love, even if we aren’t successful, even if we don’t achieve our hoped-for ends. God will always meet our love with love. God will always be there for us, like Jesus, offering us the love of the Good Shepherd, knowing us each by name, feeding us with the bread of life, and encouraging us to continue the work we have been given to do.

Jesus makes it clear, “This I command you, to love one another.” There is no simpler and no more difficult an order that he could have given. But he gives it as our friend, our companion on the journey, who has never asked anything of us he has not done himself. He gives us this command knowing we will fall short, but also knowing that we have the power within ourselves, and within our community, to keep at it, keep trying and doing our best.

My friends, I promise that we remain a community committed to loving each other and loving our neighbour, a community committed to loving God. We remain steadfast in this work knowing that we will not always get it right, but I promise that we will keep at it and keep encouraging each other in this most Christian of work.

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New York City
Easter Feria, 5 May 2018

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