

May 19, 2019

Acts 14:21-27; Rev 21:1-5a; Jn 13:31-33a, 34-35

We all face people who are a challenge to love. It is a tall order Jesus gives us in the Gospel today when he says *I give you a new commandment: love one another*. This is hard because so many people give us reasons to not love them - and if we are to be honest - we all know people that we find to be unlovable. It's easy to love the sweet grandmotherly woman bringing you warm chocolate chip cookies, but what about the person who is mean to us and treats us with hatred, what about the person who has done some sort of terrible and unspeakable crime, what about the homeless person whom we find dirty and even a bit scary? These are not so easy as grandma to love! Jesus tells us that to love as he loves is how people will know that we follow him, and also that our loving others is one of the ways that he cares for us when he is no longer with us in such a visible sense.

Jesus starts out in the Gospel by saying: *My children, I will be with you only a little while longer*. He is aware that his being there as a person who can be seen so clearly, who can speak and teach as he does is coming to an end. At the end of this month we will celebrate Jesus' Ascension - where he leaves the disciples physical site and returns to the Father. He is laying the foundation for how he will care for his loved ones after that day. He directs them: *I give you a new commandment: love one another*. What seems strange is him saying that loving each other is a "new" commandment, wasn't this always his commandment. Well here he is taking it a step farther than in the past. The "new" part is not just to love (that's the old part) but to love as he did. He goes on to say: *As I have loved you, so you also should love one another*. His love for them was deep, it was profound, it was to the death. It mirrored God's own love for his people which is represented in the sacrament of marriage. A love that remains faithful, that does not give up, that does not abandon for love of another. When he says this (at a point before his passion) he is really speaking - as God - about the historical love God has displayed for a people who often rejected him, and he is speaking - as human - of the great display of love he would show in allowing himself to be crucified for humankind. He is saying to love like that. Love even when you are treated badly, love even when the other is not loyal, love even when the other is smelly or scary or annoying, love even if it means sacrifice or letting go of something important to you or giving your own life for their's. Very tall order, but why does Jesus want this?

He wants this precisely because he is not going to be there in the same visible way. He will leave his physical presence in the Eucharist, but there will not be a human face, or ability to have a conversation, or the visible shape of a human body to see. *We* will have to be the visible presence of Jesus showing love to the unlovable, showing compassion to others who need it. This is how he will love us and others through his body the Church, and also draw others into that body by our example. He goes on to say: *This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.* If we do it, we will show ourselves to be his disciples (because we will **be** his disciples - his students, his followers). This is not always easy, but our Lord makes no promise it will be easy, and we hear in the first reading from those who are living that life of discipleship: *It is necessary for us to undergo many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.* They said this to encourage those who were following Jesus in their time and it is an encouragement to us in our time as well. There will be trials, love will involve trials, following Jesus will involve trials - but this is what our Lord asks of us so that his love may be given to those who need it and so that we and other people will be drawn to him who is the source of everlasting life.

It is a “new” commandment because it is not what we may think of from the past things God has said. It is a new commandment because it goes beyond a simple legal understanding of laws and rules. Jesus gives us not a rule, but a lifestyle. He gives it not as a demand but as an invitation into his life of grace. When we follow Jesus from our heart, acting in love to those we find unlovable, it ceases being a rule, it ceases being an onerous demand - it becomes a labor of love that brings peace. The struggle and difficulty that we undergo out of love becomes a source of peace, and the very action spreads Jesus’ love to the world. The result is that we become closer to the Lord, we engage more deeply in Jesus’ body - we move closer to the kingdom of God. Loving in this way is a great benefit to the ones who receive the love and also a benefit to the one doing the loving. This love opens us up to the action of God’s free gift of grace in our life, and it helps us to increase in the faith that will ultimately lead us to our own salvation. It is a win for the one we love, it is a win for us the lover, and it is a win for the God who wants us to share in the divine life after our death. This is a different take on love - it is new in many ways, as we hear Jesus say in the second reading: *Behold, I make all things new.*

This he says while seated on his throne in the glories of his kingdom. He calls us to love, to enter into his life more deeply, to be his disciples so that one day we join the great crowd around that throne - a place where the hateful cannot stand - a place where *He will wipe every tear from [our] eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain.* A place where those who are joined to Jesus’ body in love can bask in the love of God for all eternity.