

Sermon - 5th Sunday of Easter - 24th April, 2016

St. Jerome tells us that when the Apostle John was an old man, his message was reduced to this: "My little children, love one another." The story may or may not be true, but it is clear, as St John writes in his first epistle, that Christians are to love one another because God in Christ first loved us. Here in our Gospel reading Jesus tells his disciples that they must obey a new commandment: "Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

The call to love is nothing new in one sense, because the Hebrew Bible tells many stories of a loving God creating, rescuing, and providing for his people—and calling them back again and again through the words of the prophets. Even the details of the Law, once we get beyond the minutiae, are less about exact behaviour than they are about how to live in community and how to treat one another, taking care of the stranger, and the marginalized members of the community. It calls for fairness and truth telling, about justice and ethical behaviour—and it is also about love.

Again and again in the Gospels we hear Jesus talking about these very same issues, passing on the most basic and ancient tenets of his Jewish tradition, and saying it over and over again in many different ways. It is the basis of the Kingdom that he was encouraging his followers to make real—the Kingdom that we as Christians are to make real in this world, in the here and now.

You shall love your neighbour as yourself... Leviticus 19:18

But isn't it interesting how we always focus on the "love your neighbour" part of the equation and skip over the "love yourself" bit? How is it that over the centuries we have come to believe that we can ignore that part, that we can only obey half of that command? How is it that love of self came to be equated with narcissism and selfishness, and that hatred of self came to be seen as the correct way?

“The remarkable thing is that we really love our neighbour as ourselves: we do unto others as we do unto ourselves. We hate others when we hate ourselves. We are tolerant toward others when we

tolerate ourselves. We forgive others when we forgive ourselves. We are prone to sacrifice others when we are ready to sacrifice ourselves.”

Eric Hoffer (philosopher who died 1983)

The command says to “love your neighbour as yourself.” So how do we think we can love others if we never learn to love ourselves? How do we learn to cherish others and care for them if we never learn to do the same for ourselves? We live in a culture that devalues us and that worships death—a culture in which people escape into oblivion out of desperation, in which women and girls are taught to starve themselves or undergo dangerous procedures in order to fit some unrealistic media image of beauty and worth, in which people and relationships are sacrificed on the altar of “work,” in which cyber-reality has replaced personal connections so we don’t have to deal with real people anymore, in which power at the end of a gun is the ultimate high, in which the myth of safety is used to hold us hostage, in which war is seen as the only appropriate response. We live in a world that denies our basic human worth.

How are we to love ourselves when we are told and shown over and over again that we are unlovable? How do we reclaim our basic worth? How do we become whole, healed, holy people?

Try these 10 action points for self awareness:

- Validate our feelings, “It’s okay to feel bad sometimes.”
- Refrain from judging or placing negativity on our thoughts or feelings.
- Give ourselves a little extra comfort and soothing.
- Listen to and respect our inner experience.
- Reassure ourselves that what we are experiencing will pass.
- Remind ourselves of all the wonderful things that we are.
- Be grateful for the little (and big) things in our lives.
- Take action towards improving negative elements in our lives
- Commit to our physical health
- Invest in our psychological/emotional/spiritual health.

And then try this out on our neighbour!!

Jesus cared for himself often by going off alone to pray and refresh himself, away from the crowds and the demands—this is a consistent image of him from every Gospel. Only then did he have anything to give to those who

came to hear him speak, or who came to him for help. And, following his example, only out of the love and nurture and care that we provide ourselves—only out of that love can true love of neighbour come. Only by learning to love ourselves can we really learn to love each other.

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” John 13:34

Martin Luther preached to his congregation:

"As there is no fire without heat and smoke, so there is no faith without love. For when through faith we know how dearly God loves us we must gain a sweet and loving heart towards God, and this heart cannot stay by itself alone. It must flow forth and freely show its gratitude and love. But as God does not need our work and has not commanded us to do anything for Him but to praise and thank Him, the Christian makes haste to give wholeheartedly towards the neighbour serving and helping the neighbour."

St. Teresa of Avila said,

*"The Lord asks two things of us,
love of God and love of our neighbour.
And the further advanced you are in this,
the greater will be your love for God."*

“We can only love what we know, and we can never know completely what we do not love. Love is a mode of knowledge...”

Aldous Leonard Huxley, English writer, novelist, philosopher

What he seems to mean is:

Love is a desire to know ourselves and others completely, an appreciative desire to understand reality to its very depths. Love is a mode of knowledge, or even a mode of exploration. The more we love, the more we want to understand, and the more we understand, the more we love.

You and I are not love. We can love, but not perfectly. We see others' faults and stubbornness. When we remember the slights they have done to us, a small part of us can't forgive. We refuse to make ourselves as vulnerable as Jesus did because we know we'll get hurt again.

But we also love because it works. In his book, *Miracle on the River Kwai*, Ernest Gordon describes a very moving incident in which British prisoners of war tend the wounds of injured Japanese soldiers and feed them. The Japanese are encrusted with mud, blood and excrement. Their wounds are sorely inflamed and they are left uncared for by their own people. The British prisoners see them, take pity on them, bathe their wounds, and give them a little food to eat. They care for their enemies who have starved and beaten them, killed their comrades. God broke down the hatred and conquered it with love. Love can work miracles and break down barriers because it is truly the power of God. St John writes, "Beloved, let us love one another because love is from God." And it works in our schools and workplaces and homes and families.

Of course there are difficult situations where it is very demanding to love our neighbour as ourselves or even to love our neighbour in any way at all. In the face of Islamic extremism or any other form of terrorism, or in time of war, we are strongly tempted to dehumanise the enemy and regard them as no longer part of the human family, and so unworthy of any kind of love or respect. But Jesus' commandment to love, and his own example of forgiving those who crucified him, constantly call us to reconsider things and seek for reconciliation rather than total victory. In the end, it is only when working with the grace of God that we can love our neighbour as ourselves in this new way.

But we CAN build a little kingdom even while we wait for the promise of God's coming rule. We CAN break down barriers between people – between races and genders, ages and abilities, political opinions and ideologies. We CAN show in our lives that we believe what we say we do. We CAN be a community that loves one another, supports one another, sometimes challenges one another because we love one another.

True love is the opposite of selfishness. Selfishness confines us, keeps us shut in. It builds barriers, even walls, between us and others. It is love alone that frees us from the cage of selfishness. A doctor, who has shared some of the deepest moments in the lives of many patients, says that people facing death don't think about the degrees they've earned, the positions they've

held, or how much wealth they've amassed. What really matters at the end is whom you have loved and who has loved you.

Love always demands the best from us, and brings out the best in us. Being loved gives us a surprising energy and courage. Love makes us fruitful, productive, strong and constant in doing good. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, famous for her work on the stages of dying, has written: 'Love is the flame that warms our soul, energises our spirit and supplies passion to our lives. It's our connection to God and to one another.'

To love is to heal, both those who receive it and those who give it. To refuse to love is to die. To decide to love is to live. But love is a choice, not a feeling, and when we choose to be loving, caring, healing, helping, and forgiving persons, we experience well-being, contentment and happiness. Freedom from selfishness and freedom to love and care for others, surely that's what life is all about! There's really no other way. So Jesus insists, strongly insists: ***'Love one another, as I have loved you.'***

24th April 2016 – Easter 5

With thanks to:

B. Gleeson

J D Kegel

K L Wakefield

Ken Kesselus