

Year A Proper 18
September 5, 2020
Exodus 12:1-14
Psalm 149
Romans 13:8-14
Matthew 18:15-20

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

As we have been worshiping on the lawn this morning, let's consider what makes Christians different from other communities. What sets us apart? Jesus says that we are to *follow him*, and that we are to *love one another*, as he loves us. This is what defines us as Christians. As Bishop Curry says, we are the Episcopal branch of the Jesus community.

And in today's lessons, we see that love is one of the main themes—love for God, and love for one another. But this love is not the romantic love that our culture makes so much of, nor is it the casual use that we make of the word love—like I might say that I **love** caramel bread pudding with vanilla ice cream. (And it has been SO long since I've had this, by the way). No, that's not what we're talking about here. In the original Greek it's *agâpé* love. You might know that the Greeks had at least four different words for love. *Eros* is romantic, or sexual love. *Philia* is deep, friendly affection—like you might feel for your best friend. *Storge* is love that one feels for one's family, it's sometimes called “natural love.” But *agape* is the kind of love that God has for humankind, and in return that we have for God. *Agape* is not dependent on our worthiness, or our lovability, or on any need of God's for the return of our love, it's love of us for our own sake, because we are God's—and because God is love. Because God loves us in this way, Jesus asks us to love one another, as he loves us.

So in Romans, when Paul says that “the one who loves another has fulfilled the law,” he's using *agape*—this divine type of love. And it's not mostly an emotion, as he's explained elsewhere. No—it's **behaviors**. Remember in 1st Corinthians, where he defines *agape* love: “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.” So today, when we're asked to “love your neighbor as yourself,” we're not being asked to feel affection for our neighbor. Sometimes that's just not possible. What we're asked to do is to be patient with our neighbor, to be about compassion, and to be about reconciliation. Paul says “love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.” The Jews of Paul's day were all about obeying the law—that was their defining characteristic. But Paul is saying that if we do no wrong to anyone—if we act always in love, we ARE obeying the law. Living *agape* love is the defining characteristic of a follower of Jesus. Christians are to love. This was a subversive and radical idea at the time, both for a Jew, and for a gentile—and *it still is*. Today our culture prizes individualism, self-sufficiency, and selfishness. We couldn't have capitalism without this. So for us to say that the most important thing about following Jesus is to love God, and to love your

neighbor as yourself is to fly in the face of almost everything that we value in our culture. For us to say that living in loving Christian community, being humble with one another, asking and receiving forgiveness—to say that all of these things are important is to be *very peculiar*. And yet love is what Paul says **is** most important.

Even, in Matthew's gospel, when Jesus is describing what to do if a member of the church sins against you, he is talking about reconciliation, not punishment under the law. If we look at this lesson in the context of the whole chapter, we can see that it's one of several examples that Jesus is giving about successful life in *agape* community. Before this lesson, Jesus talks about how you should cut your hand off, or pluck your eye out before you would allow it to be a stumbling block to someone. After this lesson he tells Peter that he should forgive someone who sins against him 70 times 7. So in the context of the entire chapter, we can see that when Jesus says, "If a brother or sister of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone," he is hoping that the two of you can be reconciled in private conversation. As brothers or sisters in Christ, you can explain your differences to one another, be patient, be repentant, be forgiving, and show one another *agape*. "If your brother or sister listens to you, you have regained that one," Jesus says. And that is the ideal—that open, truthful, humble dialog will result in reconciliation. He realizes that doesn't always happen, however, so he offers the fallback position of taking "one or two others along with you" to talk with your brother or sister. This enables fairness for everyone—you, and the person who sinned against you. No one's words can be used against them; both the sinner, and the one sinned against have an advocate, and there are witnesses to everything. It's not legalistic, so much as compassion in action. If even this doesn't work, then "tell it to the church." The church can exhort the sinner to reconcile with you, **and be forgiven**—because that's still what we're about, not about punishment. If this doesn't work, then the sinner can be ejected from the community, to "be to you as a Gentile, and a tax collector." But remember that Jesus consorted, ate, and preached to Gentiles and tax collectors. So the unrepentant sinner isn't completely abandoned; he or she is still worthy of love. They are still your neighbors. And they might become part of the community at a later date.

Because we're all connected. Jesus says we are **all** neighbors. And we're seeing so many bad things happening to our neighbors lately. The news is full of pandemic, hurricanes, fires, tornadoes, earthquakes...and violence. It's disturbing to see so much catastrophe here at once, and doubly so if you know any of the victims of it. Many of us are reaching out in various ways, doing what we can to help—there are many ways to do that. But in spite of all we do, we can sometimes feel helpless and afraid in the face of all of it. Recently I was visiting a patient in the hospital, who was watching CNN when I arrived. So in addition to trying to recover from her surgery, she was distressed about the horrifying images on the screen. She turned to me and said, "if this doesn't look like the End Times, I don't know what does." She went on to describe how closely recent events paralleled what was described in the Book of Revelation, and how she was trying to prepare herself. I've thought about what she told me, and I've had two responses—for you, not for her.

The first one is, that these kinds of natural disasters and human violence have always happened, throughout history, and all over the world. As tragic and frightening as it is, this kind of thing is nothing new on our planet; this kind of violence and disaster happens all the time—and much **worse**. But we're experiencing some of these things here in our country for the first time in a long time, and we thought we were too civilized, or too democratic, or too “woke” for them to happen here. Now we see what has been hidden to so many of us. And our response needs to be to follow Jesus through all of this. Love God, love one another, love our neighbor. If we are not doing this, we are not following Jesus. Compassion, not violence; reconciliation, not conflict; love, not hatred.

My second thought is that my patient might be right. This might be the time for us “to wake from sleep” as Paul’s apocalyptic passage says, and to look for Christ to come again. And if it is the beginning of the end, then living in *agape* would be even more important than ever, because many, many people, all over the world, are going to need our help. We will need to “put on the armor of light, put on the Lord Jesus Christ” in order to be able to help them. And it would be a good thing to be living in *agape* when we walk to meet Jesus.

Amen

The Rev. Deacon Melanie K. Lewis