

Fifth Sunday of Easter - C

Everyone can love. Even babies can make it clear that they love their mothers. The three-year old who enthusiastically runs to her father yelling “daddy’s home!” is obviously not faking it.

The elderly couple strolling in the park holding hands—anybody can draw the conclusion that love is there.

Love is not really an achievement. It’s more basic than a talent. It is not a skill. It’s something anyone can offer.

And yet, we hear in the Gospel today Jesus’ commandment, “Love one another as I have loved you.”

Implied in that is the notion that there are different kinds of love, and that the love Jesus is talking about is not your garden variety of love but something quite specific.

How does Jesus’ love differ from the love of a three-year old for her dad, or the affection an elderly couple has for one another, or all those other instances in between which seem so obviously to have to do with love?

And is that commandment really something we can accomplish, we who are not Jesus, we who do not know the Father’s love as he does?

It would be cruel if, in his conversation with his disciples, Jesus laid down a commandment that was impossible to follow. How ironic that would be as well.

It must be possible, somehow, to love as Jesus loved. Otherwise, Jesus would be contradicting himself by requiring of us the impossible, and setting us up for failure—quite an unloving thing to do.

To get to the bottom of what Jesus is talking about we have to reconsider what we mean by love.

The sort of emotional ties we often equate with love are, by nature, limited to a set number of people. We cannot love everyone with the emotional commitment of a mother for her infant son, or a newly married husband for his spouse.

Love has to be possible even when the emotional component is lacking, or maybe even running in the opposite direction.

The mom trying to corral a screaming pre-schooler while shopping in the supermarket may not be feeling a lot of affection at that particular moment, but she can still be the loving parent. We understand that.

And when we think about the love that Jesus displayed, even in the midst of ongoing misunderstanding and, at times, open resistance to what he was trying to do, we get a glimpse of a love that runs deeper than how a person feels.

The love Jesus showed his disciples involved self-sacrifice for the sake of

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the other's good, unwavering commitment even in the face of conflict and opposition, considering the other's needs as being as valid as our own—these definitions of love carry more weight with God than the hearts and flowers kind.

So, because of Jesus' example, we do have an inkling about the love that God is calling us to. And since, the commandment to love one another is so central to Jesus' teaching, it is not unfair to ask why there is often so little love on display among the disciples of Jesus.

We can accept that there will be times when our actions will be motivated by love even when emotions are somewhere else. Any parent of a teenager can tell you about that.

But what about those times when the action seems far removed from any sort of loving or charitable motivation?

We all have been on the receiving end of hurtful statements—moments when we would be hard pressed to find even a kernel of care and concern on the part of the other.

And maybe we can be honest enough with ourselves to admit that there have been moments when our own motivations have been far removed from even the most basic forms of charity.

And it doesn't even have to be moments when our anger gets the better of us. Sometimes indifference is enough. In fact, indifference may be the bigger problem because so often it is invisible to us. But for the person in need of our help, anger or indifference come out about the same: neither suffices.

Today we have two things to do: we are invited to take heart that God's love is what it is: steadfast, effective, transformative.

And we are confronted with a call—one that is not beyond us in spite of its challenge: that we love one another as God loves us.

Jesus meant for love to be the hallmark of the community of disciples—the kind of love that is committed to the good of the other.

Our Christian history tells the story of how we have fallen short of Jesus' call. And yet, the Holy Spirit is still in our midst. A response is still possible.

We pray today that the Holy Spirit will continue to move in our hearts and in our world, that we will find effective means of showing love to others as they need it, and by doing so, give witness to the truth that God's love is abounding, and that the work he has begun in us through the sacrificial love of Jesus can be brought to its completion in the world.