

St. James Lutheran Church
Easter 5
May 2, 2010
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First Reading: Acts 11:1-18
Second Reading: Revelation 21:1-6
Gospel: John 13:31-35

Known for Loving

What's the public image of Christians these days? What impressions does the average man in the street have of those who follow Jesus? The results of a recent poll are not encouraging. A majority of those polled describe Christians as:

intolerant
narrow minded
judgmental
self righteous
self serving

Of course public opinion can be inaccurate, but that's the perception that's out there. Religion is viewed by many not as an asset, but as the cause of many problems. Critics point to the hostilities between Catholics & Protestants in Northern Ireland. The suspicion & violent antagonism between Christians & Muslims.

Jonathan Swift, who wrote Gulliver's Travels, once observed: "We have just enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love." History provides plenty of supporting evidence.

We Christians have an image problem. It's not just the Pope or some disgraced televangelist. Many are dubious about Christians in general.

Now our mission is not to get favorable reviews and accolades. We don't need some sort of high-powered public relations campaign to restore our image. We can dismiss the perceptions of outsiders as prejudiced or uninformed.

Nevertheless, it is Jesus who says: "By this everyone will know you are my followers, if you have love for one another."

Jesus makes love the standard by which you and I are to be measured. The Beatles once sang: "All You Need Is Love." Love may not be all we need, but it is at the top of the list of essentials.

Love is not abstract. We know love when we see it, when we experience it. We also know when it is lacking – when we or others are unloved. In the news recently there was a sad story of a Good Samaritan who became a victim. Surveillance cameras recorded how a man attempted to rescue a woman who was being mugged on the street. The assailant turned on this man and severely wounded him with a knife. Subsequently, numerous individuals came upon this man, bleeding on the sidewalk. They stopped to look & hurried on. No one helped. No one even called 911. The man bled to death.

We learn from the story Jesus tells of a Samaritan that love is a verb – an action word, love is an activity – something we do. Too often, we turn love into an inactive, inert noun by idealizing or romanticizing it. Just about everyone is in favor of the idea of love: love as the gold standard, love as something worthy & good, something to which we aspire.

Poet Ursula LeGuin reminds us of the true nature of love: “Love just doesn’t sit there like a stone; it has to be made, like bread, remade all the time, made now.” Ponder that image: love as home-baked bread.

You can’t just buy it at the store.

You have to plan to make it.

You need the basic ingredients & the time.

You put in the effort that results in a shared blessing.

Both those who give and receive, those who bake and those who eat are blessed. Is it any wonder Jesus said: “I am the Bread of Life?”

For us as Christians, it’s not enough to “believe in love,” to advocate love “as the best policy.” No one is going to argue with that – or be very impressed by such belief.

To be worthy of the name Christian, you and I need to be actively engaged in the serious, difficult, joyful, risky, ongoing business of loving. Loving is not the same as “being nice.” Nothing wrong with being nice, yet with Jesus as our model for loving, it’s apparent that there’s more to it than being nice. The story from our First Reading tells how Peter’s heart and mind were stretched to include Gentiles in the Kingdom of God. Peter had to go beyond what was comfortable and familiar to welcome those who had always been viewed as unclean outsiders as brothers and sisters in Christ.

On Friday we saw the production of “Les Miserables” at Lake Forest High School. (great show) There’s a vivid tale of what love is and what love costs – reminding us that to truly love someone is to see the face of God.

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As the poet says, love needs to be remade all the time – made new. Fresh loaves need to be kneaded and baked. We all need daily bread.

It is the nature and power of love to make things new – to transform lives. The Lord says in our reading today from Revelation: “See, I am making all things new.” The Book of Revelation anticipates that time when love will finally rule in all hearts – it will be the norm. All those thirsty for love will have it in abundance.

You and I are meant to be heralds & signs of this promised blessing. We are not supposed to just wait for God’s Kingdom to come – we are called to do God’s will here on earth as it is in heaven--by loving.

Why do we love? Because of Jesus. Jesus commands us to love – but even more we love because he first loved us. We love because we have experienced his goodness and grace. We have been blessed.

If this is not true for you – we need to talk! You can’t give what you have not received. Being commanded to love without being loved is like being told to make bread without flour.

How do we love?

Like Jesus: love as I have loved you.”

Let’s be clear about what it means to say we are called to be like Jesus. You and I are to be like Jesus:

- * not in saving the world (that’s his job)
- * not in working miracles
- * not by knowing all the answers

But by doing what we can do: by faithfully loving in ordinary, everyday circumstances. Showing mercy, extending compassion and forgiveness, walking the extra mile, paying attention, taking the time to listen.

We are capable of great things – but that’s not all we should look to accomplish. As Mother Teresa showed us, we can also do small things with great love:

- * spending one afternoon a week with the kids at A J Katzenmaier
- * being patient with your son our daughter – or with an aging parent
- * driving a child to visit a mother who is in prison
- * reassuring your spouse of your love and support
- * visiting a fellow member in the hospital
- * making a phone call to let someone know you are thinking of them.

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Being a disciple, becoming like Jesus, is all about: getting over yourself and all your issues and wishes and pet peeves, and getting on with being a blessing to others--being a sign that God really is good and God’s love is for real.

Here’s the truth: That which keeps us from our neighbor keeps us from God. Are you feeling far from God? Out of touch? Can’t seem to pray? Can’t feel the love? Try loving your neighbor.

Dorothy Day spoke the truth about us all: “I really only love God as much as the person I love the least.”

This weekend I have the privilege of dog-sitting for the Clemens golden retriever, Cooper. If you’ve met Cooper, you know what a wonderful house guest he is. Hanging out with Cooper brought to mind what a Christian monk said way back in the 4th century: “a dog is better than I am, for he has love and does not judge.”

Friends, if we can’t always be as good as Jesus – can we be as good as a dog?

We will be known as Christ’s disciples by this: if we have love for one another.

Amen