

A sermon preached by the Revd RL Ficks III at Church of the Good Shepherd, Houlton, Maine on the Fifth Sunday of Easter (5/19), 2019

Acts 11:1-18; Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35

If one were to be asked, “What day of the year is the one most singularly dedicated to love,” I suspect that the answer might pretty universally be, at least in the United States, Valentine’s Day. Surely, on most counts, that answer might be the best one, for few days in the year are so single-mindedly given over to flowery cards, heart-shaped boxes of chocolates, and the like.

On the other hand, I doubt if anyone would ever respond to such a question by answering that the day most singularly dedicated to love was Good Friday.

Yet that is perhaps, for those who would be Christians, the proper answer.

Could two days be less alike than the two just mentioned? I doubt it. And could two notions of love be less alike than the notions reflected in those two days? I doubt it. The one is all fuzzy ducklings, gauzy sunsets, and sentimental sweetness. Not that there is anything wrong with that. It has its place. It is, however, nothing to do with the second kind of love of which we speak.

Jesus reclines at table with his closest friends...those who have continued with him in his troubles and his journey. Before the inevitable final steps in his earthly journey take place, they share one last meal together. Much transpires in those moments together at that supper that will change the course of human history. Bread is broken, blessed, and given with words that would forever change its nature for the eyes of the faithful. Wine is poured out, blessed, and consumed accompanied by words that would make it the very lifeblood of those who believe. And above all, at the absolute apex of all that transpired that night...in fact, perhaps in the entire sweep of human history...a new commandment is given.

Judas goes out into the darkness of night to undertake the darkest of deeds...and, in that moment, Jesus says that “Now is the son of man glorified.” Now...in betrayal and the ensuing suffering and death his glory begins. Now...in the seeming utter defeat of any claim he might make to be the Messiah lies grandeur unseen by the world but of inestimable glory in the divine economy of heaven. Now...in what would seem a laughingstock to the world...the cruelest joke of all time...now is God’s glory finally and fully revealed.

And in the midst of such incredible contradictions...such seeming madness in the eyes of a power-hungry, materialistic, dog-eat-dog, the-person-with-the-most-toys wins, I’ve-got-mine-now-you-try-to-get-yours world ...in the midst of all this, Jesus gives his final charge to those who would be his disciples.

“A new commandment I give you, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, that you also should love one another.”

As with the transformation of his words regarding bread and wine, so too with this commandment, three days must pass before they move from simply being words...words that, given what the disciples were about to witness, must have come to seem almost laughable...move from simply being words to being the stuff of eternity...the warp and woof of all creation...the essence, nourishment, and sustaining force in the lives of the faithful...the food and drink and footpath leading to eternal life and peace and joy.

Oh dear God, the love demonstrated in those next hours...the utter giving up of himself for the sake of the world...the complete self-giving of God in this itinerant preacher from Nazareth that the entire creation might be made new...the utter eradication of every single atom of self-regard or self-protection in order that others might have life and have it abundantly...the absolute abandonment of even the most remote vestige of worldly grandeur to inherit the grandeur of the kingdom of God...the ultimate expression and action of caring for others

rather than oneself. God's cry to us echoes across eternity as never before, "Do you not understand yet? What more can I possibly do to make you see?"

And, of course, that is the very heart of the matter. They were words...yes, words indeed...but they had no meaning until they became actions...and, with those actions, the kingdom was opened.

Dear friends, it is no different with us. All the kind words in the world are well and good. All the fine sentiments are lovely. All the deeply-felt emotions nice as can be. But none of them mean anything until they issue in action on our part...acts that mirror...or better yet make incarnate...that very love our Lord made known to us throughout his life...but most especially during those hours of which we speak this morning.

He has commanded us...he has not urged or suggested or hinted...he has commanded that we love as he loved. That love is not sentiment...emotion...or talk...it is action. What we do with our lives is all that matters.

What are we each doing? How are we caring for others? How are we putting away our own needs and caring for the needs of a world screaming out in need and pain and dire distress? How are we forgoing what we want and seeking to fulfill the desperate wanting of a million millions about us in a world so rife with suffering and need that only hubris of unfathomable depth can make us blind to its reality?

"Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

I am struck by the words of the late Pope, John Paul II, when, in August, 2000, he addressed the World Youth Day Prayer Vigil as follows, "It is Jesus, in fact, that you seek when you dream of happiness, he is waiting for you when nothing else you find satisfies you; he is the beauty to which you are so attracted; it is he who provokes you with that thirst for fullness that will not let you settle for compromise; it is he who urges you to shed the masks of a false life; it is he who reads in you hearts your most genuine choices, the choices that others try to stifle. It is Jesus who stirs in you the desire to do something great with you lives, the will to follow an ideal, the refusal to allow yourselves to be ground down by mediocrity, the courage to commit yourselves humbly and patiently to improving yourselves and society, making the world more humane..."

All the things we think and hope...all the good intentions within us mean nothing until we, "humbly and patiently," take actions to "make the world more humane."

Perhaps George Herbert expressed it close to perfectly in his sublime poetry when he penned,

Come, my Way, my Truth, My life:

Such a way as gives us breath;

Such a truth as ends all strife;

Such a life as killeth death.

Come, my Light, my Feast, my Strength:

Such a light as shows a feast;

Such a feast as mends at length;

Such a strength as makes his guest.

Come, my Joy, my Love, my Heart;

Such a joy as none can move;

Such a love as none can part;

Such a heart as joys in love.