

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

May 6, 2007

Psalm 148, John 13:31-35

Not If But When

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Back in February as I was planning themes for the weeks of Bob's sabbatical, John 13 seemed like a good idea. "There is such wealth in the concept of love that I can enjoy the reflection and the sermon writing and besides, it's Communion Sunday and that is even more appropriate." This was my thought process – in February. In May, I am clueless. What can I say that is different or compelling and not sound like a Hallmark card? Don't get me wrong. I believe in the power of love. I resonate to Paul's words, "Love bears all things, hopes all things, believes all things, endures all things. Love never ends." So how come Paul can say it without sounding like a Hallmark Card?

There are so many definitions of love that I may be struggling with a trivialization of the concept. We all know what it means when we say, "I love my husband or my partner. I love my children or my grandchildren. I love my dear friends." We also know what it means when we say, "I love golf. I love Cherry Garcia Ice Cream. I love my new HDTV." Somehow these love verbs just do not equate. Well, maybe for some people they do!

Jesus certainly wasn't trivializing love. The conversation we heard this morning took place at the last supper. In John's gospel this was Jesus' final teaching moment. He had begun by washing the feet of his disciples. They were shocked that their leader would stoop to the level of a slave by washing their feet and sought to bring him back to his senses. In tying a towel around his waist and pouring water over their feet, he

showed them that the role of each member of the Christian community is to be servant to every other member. No one is more important than anyone else. No one is loved or respected more than anyone else. Following on that surprising action, Jesus gave them the new commandment to love one another as he loved them. Even if that love meant discomfort, inconvenience or the ultimate sacrifice, their duty was to love. And only through that visibly shared love would the members of the Christian community be fully his disciples.

In the years of the early church, by their obvious and sincere care for one another Christians were a phenomenon. Their small communities were havens of love and dignity. In a world dominated by power and family connections, Christians were indefinable square pegs in the round holes of Roman culture. The loving community attracted slaves who sought to be treated with dignity. Women seeking friendship and respect were drawn to the community. The poor, the marginal seeking comfort and support gladly came. Wealthy matrons and common soldiers came seeking something beyond their empty lives. Ultimately, they came because they were in search of love. In the midst of their fellow believers, they found what they sought, received it in abundance and returned it in kind. Thus did Christianity begin to grow?

So what happened? Human nature happened. Pride, jealousy, theological disagreements, the seductive attraction to power and consequent divisions within communities all happened. Throughout the 2000 years, all kept happening. All still happen today in one way or another.

We have now had almost 2,000 years to get the commandment right and we still keep falling on our faces. Perhaps we humans have always existed in loveless deserts

and just haven't realized how parched we really are. But we can't live without love and so we have our own personal oases from which we drink deeply. But we construct high fences around our wells to protect our water. Those fences prevent us from seeing the arid plain beyond filled with lovelessness.

Our oases are good and necessary. My oasis is the loving companionship of family and friends. This congregation is very much a part of my refreshment. But still there is the fence. How do we tear down the fences and create channels to water that arid plain? How do we find the courage to embody the commandment not only among those we love but also to those beyond? How do we learn to take the commandment as seriously as Christ meant for it to be taken?

I enjoy science fiction stories in which the evil aliens threaten the human community. All the nations set aside their warfare and work together to defeat the invaders. Like many folks I wonder if universal love and respect is possible in a world population that universally condones power and war. In the movies, I find myself rooting for the evil aliens if that's what it takes to bring us together. But that is fantasy and we live in a real world that is crying out for the love that our human family seems incapable of maintaining.

Neither you nor I can heal the world. We can however, heal ourselves. Those of us who have children need to model Christian love for them. Teach them to love by your loving actions. I can recall my father often going out of his way to give someone a hand. I can remember my mother opening our home to schoolchildren who had been bused in from the inner city and needed a place to come for lunch. Every single one of the seven of us learned well the lessons our parents taught and have passed them on to our children.

Live with awareness of the needs of others. How often do we say, “If I had only known...” If it has been a long time since a neighbor has been seen, don’t ignore the instinct that says ‘check it out.’ That person may be in need of your help and unwilling to ask for it.

Volunteer some time at JUMP or Meals On Wheels or the Possibility Shop. Sometimes the people you meet among the clients are grateful. Those folks are easy to love. Some other times, the clients are hard to work with, ungrateful and complaining. It is hard to love folks like that, but they need love badly. Love them with respect. Love them with patience. Love them with genuine concern. Miracles may happen.

Will this change the world? No, but it will change you.

There is a beautiful song by Jacques Brel occasionally strays into the Hallmark card arena but manages to pull itself out. I asked to have it sung at my Ordination. I asked to have it sung here at my installation. Somebody please remember that I want it sung at my Memorial Service. The song is called: *If We Only Have Love*. The words present the hopeful message that if we can finally learn how to obey the commandment of love, we will have the earth that we all yearn for. I quote a few lines:

If we only have love
To embrace without fears
We will kiss with our eyes
We will sleep without tears.
If we only have love with our arms open wide
Then the young and the old
Will stand at our side.
If we only have love
Love that’s falling like rain
Then the parched desert earth
Will grow green again.
If we only have love

We can reach those in pain
We can heal all our wounds
We can use our own names.
If we only have love
We can melt all the guns
And then give a new world
To our daughters and sons.
If we only have love
Then Jerusalem stands
And then death has no shadow
There are no foreign lands.
If we only have love
We will never bow down
We'll be tall as the pines
Neither heroes nor clowns.
Then with nothing at all
But the little we are
We'll have conquered all time,
All space, the sun and the stars.

We can afford not to love. It is not if we love but when we finally accept the reality of our need to love that we will see this dream become real. On this Communion Sunday may we find in the bread and the cup, the strength to love, the faith to trust in God's future and the persistence to hope even when logic argues against hope. Love one another and all truly will be well. Amen.