

Easter 05 C 2019  
May 19, 2019 :: John 13:31-35  
Fr. Jim Cook

*“No More Insiders & Outsiders.”*

Our gospel reading comes from that part of John’s gospel that’s known as the Farewell Discourse. It’s a densely-packed five chapters filled with the final acts and sayings of Jesus. And because we tend to give more weight to the words of a person who knows that his or her death is near, the things that Jesus did and said in these chapters become even more important to us, because Jesus knew that *his* death was imminent. And one of those final words from Jesus included this:

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35).

Now, the command to love others was not new in scripture. Way back in Leviticus (which is the third book of the Bible), God commanded the Jewish people to “love your neighbor as yourself.”

But back then, one's neighbors were all of the other Jews in the vicinity. In other words, back then, your neighbors were people who were like you: they shared your culture, they shared your religion, and they shared your language. And that was fine, until Jesus redefined the term "neighbor," in his parable of the good Samaritan, to include *anyone* in need, even foreigners and strangers. And so, I don't think it's too much of a stretch to interpret Jesus' command to "love one another" as a command to love — literally, to work for the benefit of — *everyone*, those like us, and those different from us.

In fact, one of the reasons the ministry and teaching of Jesus has remained so influential, even after more than 2,000 years, is because Jesus was always redefining membership in God's family. He never hesitated to toss out the old "entrance exams" (if you will) and ignore the prevailing religious and cultural *status quo*. It was almost as if Jesus was telling us that the old ways of doing things just don't work anymore, and so we need to be always trying to find new ways of being the people of God.

Now, if you're like me, and seek comfort from your faith, then ideas like this can be troublesome and disconcerting, because I like to have my world well-defined and predictable. I like limits

and boundaries. And even as a priest, I like to be able to clearly distinguish orthodox teachings from heretical ones. And simply as a human being, I like being able to know who's with us and who's against us.

But Jesus didn't seem to have this problem. No matter where he was, you could always count on him hanging out with the "wrong" people. It didn't seem to matter if they were tax collectors, prostitutes, lepers, Samaritans, or even Gentiles. And the reason for all this unconventional behavior is because *Jesus was the perfect embodiment of God's love*. And if you have read the scriptures, as I have, one of the things you'll realize is that God is an extremely radical lover of people. He loves the unlovable. He embraces the untouchable. He sees infinite value in each person. And because he likes to meddle in our lives, God wants us to be just like him: that is, to be extravagant, radical lovers of people.

So, what does radical love look like? Jesus described it pretty well, in Luke chapter six, when he said

"But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who

abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Luke 6).

In other words, radical love goes against our human nature. It leads us in directions we'd prefer not to go. It isn't concerned with personal comfort, with what “feels” right. It doesn't try to distinguish insiders from outsiders, the deserving from the undeserving, or even the worthy from the unworthy. The radical love of God leads us into communion with all people; that is, “walking together” with the person next to you, no matter who they are or what they might be like. And in the community of God's radical love, there is no such thing as broken or impaired communion.

A modern example of a radical lover of people was the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr. While he was jailed in Birmingham, Alabama, King wrote this to his wife:

I gradually gained a bit of satisfaction from being an extremist. Was not Jesus an extremist in love [when he said] ‘Love your enemies and pray for them that despitefully use you.’

Was not [the prophet] Amos an extremist for justice [when he said] ‘Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.’

Was Paul not an extremist for the Gospel of Jesus Christ [when he said] ‘I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus Christ.’

Was not Martin Luther an extremist [when he said] ‘Here I stand, I can do no other, so help me God.’

Was not John Bunyan an extremist [when he said] ‘I will stay in jail to the end of my days before I make a butchery of my conscience.’

Was not Abraham Lincoln an extremist  
[when he said] ‘This nation cannot survive  
half slave and half free.’

Was not Thomas Jefferson an extremist  
[when he said] ‘We hold these truths to be  
self-evident, that all men are created equal.’

So the question is not whether we will be  
extremist but *what kind of extremist* will we  
be? Will we be extremist for hate or will we be  
extremist for love?

God calls us each to be radical lovers of people. And he knows that this world is filled with people who are hard to love. And he knows the price we often have to pay when we do what he calls us to do; after all, he went to the cross, figuring that one out. And for us who are indeed called to be radical lovers, it’s tempting to hesitate because we’re afraid of what it might cost us, or of what we may lose in the process. Perhaps in response to such concerns, Scott Peck wrote this in his best-selling book *The Road Less Traveled*:

When I genuinely love, I am extending myself, and when I am extending myself I am growing. The more I love, the longer I love, the larger I become. Genuine love is replenishing. The more I nurture the spiritual growth of others, the more my own spiritual growth is nurtured ... And as I grow through love, so grows my joy, ever more present, ever more constant.

I can remember, as a young Christian, singing the song,

This is my commandment that you love one another that your joy may be full.

The challenge that Jesus sets before us in today's gospel reading, is the challenge to become radical lovers of people. And it's a challenge that calls us, not to *give up* our lives, but to *give away* our lives, for the benefit of someone else. It is a call, in other words, to be, as Dr. King described it, an extremist for love; To be willing to go into those places, and be with those people, we'd rather avoid. And, as Christians, to live our lives balancing our desire to cling to the familiar and comfortable, to balance that

with God's invitation to embrace the unfamiliar and the uncomfortable. But if we can do that, then we will find ourselves growing spiritually, and we'll find our lives filled with more and more joy.

And, finally, let us not forget the words of Winston Churchill:

“We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.”

And that, my friends, is the Good News of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Amen.