

Pentecost 21A October 25 2020
Matthew 22:34-46
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth
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Grace, peace, and love to you from God: Father, Jesus, and Holy Spirit, one God in perfect unity, now and forever. Amen.

“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” [Jesus] said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”
Let's pray:

Which commandment in the law is the greatest? Love! Love! Love! It rolls off the tongue so beautifully and it makes us feel good doesn't it. Why? What is love? What does it mean to love with all your heart, soul, and mind? God, neighbour, self, and dare I suggest, enemies?

Sometimes love appears as a noun as in 1 John 4:8, 'God is love,' which St Paul has a pretty good crack at defining in 1 Corinthians:

'If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends' [13:1-8a]. Love transcends all things.

Yet, it's where "love" appears as a verb, a doing word, an action as in today's gospel, that its dynamism and power and intent is revealed. And today it's preceded with the force of an imperative: "You shall." But the essence and beauty of love is not doing something because we are commanded to, rather, because we are willing to, for the sake of Jesus. Some examples:

A couple of years ago, I visited a man who spent the last two months of his life in a hospital bed in the RAH. Hospitals can be miserable and lonely places for the long-term ill; their situation exacerbated by uncertainty, untimely interruptions, and hospital food. Two months would have felt like two years for this poor bloke, had he not have had the constant companionship and devotion of his wife who lived in his room through the ups and downs, the good and bad, for the entire two months. She laid down her life that he might understand Christ's presence with him and what Christ did for us all. It was a tremendous gift of love.

So often we think love is about emotions, feelings, and sweet words. There's nothing wrong with those things and they're a legitimate part of love. We all want to be told we're loved. We want to feel the warmth, security, and tenderness that comes with love. At some point, however, love, if it's to be real, must become tangible, revealed not only by words and feelings but by actions. In this case, a pillow, a blanket, considerable personal discomfort and self-denial were the signs and means of love. "Little children," John writes in his first letter, "let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action" (1 John 3:18).

Another example is our welfare shed. What a magnificent witness to the Elizabeth community. From what I understand, somewhere around five decades of commitment have been poured into

providing this community with inexpensive, good quality clothing, gifts, and homeware. And I know that one of our Saints takes home all of the donated clothing items, washes them, probably irons them, and with others, sorts, hangs, bags, sells, and donates these things to the “least of these”. In this case, a washing machine, iron, time, and helping hands and hearts express love in truth and action. They don’t talk about it; they just do it. Our musicians also come to mind and you all have your own stories.

Please don’t misunderstand. This isn’t about doing good works for your salvation. Your salvation has already been secured by Jesus on the cross and the faith he grows in you through hearing his Word and receiving the sacraments. I’m talking about the things you do out of gratitude because you are saved. When you respond to what Jesus has first done for you, he uses your faithful witness to reach out to others that they too might believe.

So, in the immortal words of Tina Turner, “What’s love got to do with it?” Everything. It has everything to do with Christmas, Easter, resurrection - Jesus Christ. God’s love for humanity became tangible in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. God enacted love. God is love.

“We know love by this,” John tells us, “that he laid down his life for us” (1 John 3:16). In laying down his life Jesus chooses us. Jesus isn’t the victim of someone’s power or agenda. If he’s a victim at all, he’s the victim of his own, all-consuming, divine love. Saints, his life wasn’t taken from him, it was given to us; a choice and gift he willingly offered. That’s why we call Jesus the Good Shepherd (John 10).

Hired hands trade labour for wages. They care nothing about the sheep. The good shepherd, Jesus, however, lives and dies for love. He lays down his life for his sheep. He knows them and they know him, just as the Father knows him and he knows the Father. The very same relationship that Jesus has with his Father we can have with Jesus. This relationship of knowing is one of intimacy and love; between the Father and Jesus and between Jesus and you.

This intimate love is at the heart of resurrected life. Resurrection is about a laying-down-life kind of love. Four times in John 10, Jesus says that he lays down his life. Four times he says to us, “I love you.” Four times he describes the pattern for our lives. In John’s first letter he’s explicit about this pattern: ‘We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another’ (1 John 3:16).

For Christ, love is lived; and how we live is always a choice. It’s a choice driven by our compassion for, and willingness to do something about the life and needs of others, whether they’re in our own families, this congregation, or the broader community. To love God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and to love your neighbour as yourself, means being willing to lay down your life for others, regardless of who they are.

Our faith in Jesus can’t be separated from how and whom we love. Our belief in his name is revealed in laying down our life for others.

Whenever we lay down our life for others, we proclaim that resurrection isn’t just an historical remembrance. It’s a present, living reality. Laying down our life makes Jesus’ resurrection tangible and real. The only reason we can ever lay down our life for others is because Jesus first laid down his life for us. The shepherd never takes

his sheep somewhere he's unwilling to go and never asks for something he himself is unwilling to give. Every time we lay down our life in love for others, we remember Jesus' death and proclaim his resurrection as we await the day of his coming.

The opportunities for a laying-down-life kind of love are everywhere. You don't have to go far; family and friends we see every day; the people of this congregation, and of Playford City. They're the strangers who pass through our lives. They're the nameless faces talked about as issues, like poverty, hunger, homelessness, education, unemployment. But the opportunities for laying-down-life love aren't circumstances; they're people, human beings created in the image and likeness of God.

We need only be present and pay attention to know how and where love asks us to lay down our life for others. A laying-down-life kind of love means we'll have to change our usual routines. It's no longer business as usual. The life and well-being of "others" now sets our agenda and guides our decisions and actions. That sounds a lot like how Jesus lived and died.

Laying down our life isn't the end of life. It wasn't for Jesus, nor is it for us. It's rather, the beginning of a new life, a more authentic life, a life that looks a lot like Jesus' life. It's a life in which hands, feet, ears, eyes, hearts, minds, and souls are being reinvigorated daily by the breath of God and empowered by his Holy Spirit. Call it what you want, Christmas, Easter, resurrection, the good shepherd; it's all the same, a laying-down-life kind of love. Love God, love neighbour, love yourself; because you have first received Jesus' saving love. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.