

The Rev. Catherine A. Caimano
5 Easter C – Acts 11:1-18; Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35
May 2, 2010
St. John's Episcopal Church, Wichita, KS

‘Love one another as I have loved you.’

This is the great commandment given to us by Jesus, this is part of the New Testament, the new life that we live because of the death and resurrection of the Messiah. This is what makes us, in a very real sense, Christian. Not just that we love one another, but that we love one another as we have been loved by God. And what does this mean?

One clue is given to us in our wonderful story from the Acts of the Apostles - the story of Peter and the vision of the unclean foods. God is showing Peter that what Peter thinks is outside the realm of God is not necessarily so. God is saying that part of our life as Christians is to be stretched beyond where we are comfortable, opened to what we had not considered before.

And Jesus, in the part of the long goodbye speech at the last supper that we read today, is in some ways doing the same thing. Because even though he talks of love among disciples, something that you'd think would be easy enough, always notice that Jesus says this AFTER Judas has gone out.

Do you ever wonder where he went?

Not ultimately, of course – we know that he eventually goes to the Roman authorities to betray Jesus, and still later he dies a terrible death, but what happened to him right after he left the table where he ate that last supper with Jesus and the other disciples?

Because Judas was part of the family, despite what he did. He had been there throughout Jesus' ministry, he was entrusted with the treasury, and even that night he had been there through Jesus' washing of his followers' feet, even his own, and he stayed until Jesus revealed that he knew one of them was going to betray him, and he let Judas know – although in a way that the others there did not understand – Jesus signaled to Judas that he knew what Judas was going to do, and it was then that Judas left the table. Right before Jesus gave the commandment to love one another to those who remained.

Where do you suppose he went?

Somehow I have always envisioned him walking around in the night. I imagine he has an attack of conscience, or a panic knowing his deception has been found out, and he is walking and thinking and talking to himself, trying to calm himself down and work through what he is about to do and why.

And at that same moment, warm and well-fed and blissfully unsuspecting of what is going to happen next, eleven others are gathered with Jesus talking about love. And it is hard for me to imagine one of these scenes without the other, and I suspect that this is exactly why Jesus chose this moment to say these things.

Because, on the one hand, it is easy to imagine Jesus' commandment, and the fact that he waits to tell the disciples to love one another until AFTER Judas has left, as a way of saying that there are SOME who will be left out of the embrace of God's love. Whether by their own choices or by God's, they will NOT be saved.

And it is true that some of us, no matter how many good things are offered us, will get up from the table and leave. Will not want to take part in our families or our communities, will remove ourselves from our places of security.

When I worked in New York, I ran a soup kitchen, and I knew many, many people who reminded me of Judas in this way. I heard many stories from people who had every privilege in life, but for whatever reason, gave it all away. They sat on the outside of many warm rooms, looking in. But not because they were denied, because they kept themselves there.

And in our theology, as well as our reality, we define this as hell: the space outside of the love of God, outside of the circle where our main job is love. And Jesus, in making this statement, giving this commandment to love AFTER Judas is gone, COULD be saying that there will always be those on the outside, those who will walk alone in the dark.

On the other hand, though, Jesus COULD have chosen that moment precisely so that he could demonstrate to his disciples how hard this love business really is. How easy it is to agree to, how much we all want it, and how hard it is to put in practice. How there are people who won't accept our love, people who, frankly, offend us and we would rather avoid, people it is just easier to negotiate around – to make believe that God never meant for us to love THEM, for whatever reason.

It makes me wonder, after the disciples received this commandment, after dinner was over, did they ask each other where Judas went? Did anyone go after him to see if there was anything wrong? Did any of the other eleven even SUSPECT what may have been brewing in his mind?

In this moment, the disciples, whether they knew it or not, were already involved in the complexities of love, in the difficulty in staying together when there are so many things that pull us apart. And like Peter in Acts, they will shortly find out that just trying to exclude our neighbors on the basis of what God wants will not work either, because God keeps upping the ante and reminding us that whatever new group we see fit to exclude – in Peter's case it was non-Jews – God has other plans, plans to include them in this life of love, too.

And because of this, this scene at the Last Supper would not be complete without Judas, without his absence from the table, without the knowledge that our warm and happy community is not actually the whole story.

And this is the good news, this is the love we learn as Christians.

That we are bothered, that we notice, that a seat is empty, which means that we are compelled to always be searching for why everyone is not there. This is our challenge as disciples, too, that life is NOT about who ends up on top, or on the inside, it is not about securing only our safety, our happiness, but being unable to share our meal without also sharing in the knowledge that the guest list is not yet complete.

And in this we know that it not about the winners and the losers of the struggles in life, but that we are all in this together.

No matter what the reason, love demands that we account for our brothers and sisters, even those we would never otherwise consider, and that we cannot be Christian, or human, alone.

In our reading from Revelation today, we read from one of the very last passages in the Bible. It is the celebration of that day that we all wait for, and all believe in. It is the last day when God reconciles all things to Godself, where Eden and Jerusalem are both restored, when every tear is wiped from every eye.

Until then here we are, living two lives – the warm and happy rooms where we are reminded that love is the most important thing, that nothing else defines or sustains us, and the cold dark streets where Judas walks, alone in fear and betrayal, with evil looming.

Our story as disciples is to never believe in one without the other – to believe that our role in joy is to reach out to the lost and the lonely, the reviled and the excluded, and that our role in darkness is to put our trust in light.

And to keep moving forward in the understanding that not everyone is at the table YET, not any of us is completely in that place of love YET, while there is still a seat empty. Judas is still out there, and we ALL have work to do until the day he comes home.