

**THE CIRCLE OF LOVE; JOHN 13: 31-35; EASTER V, APRIL 24, 2016;
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I once heard the employee of a large national corporation say, "It would be a great company if it weren't for all the people." You could say the same thing about almost any organization – even the church.

One of the primary reasons people of any age do not affiliate with a church or have little interest in attending one is because of the in-fighting and back-biting. Young adults, in particular, shy away because of the political wars and battles that go on; painful memories of moralistic judgment and gossip keep many people from filling the pews on a Sunday morning. Were it not for Jesus' interceding, stepping in when the disciples wanted to dismiss some poor outcast or condemn some innocent bystander it's easy to believe the nascent Christian movement would have ended long ago.

Mark Twain is reputed to have said, "I love humanity, it's the people I can't stand." And so today's text to "love one another" is a most appropriate message for society at large in any century, and for the church in particular.

Christianity aspires to be a religion of peace and harmony, after its founder, Jesus of Nazareth. And yet there is something in human nature, harkening back to the tragic tale of Cain and Abel that tells a very different story about us.

This may be why Jesus refers to his instruction today as a "commandment." Can you imagine if he said, "I'd like you to love another"? Or, "would you consider loving one another"? He knew perfectly well what he was commanding us to do and he knew how difficult it would be.

Notice he precedes this commandment by referring to his followers as "little children." While the phrase has an endearing quality, if you consider that he was talking to – rough-hewn Galilean fishermen and a wily tax collector – you have to ask yourself in what way he thought they resembled children.

Yes, we are called to embrace our faith with the trust and innocence of children, yet my hunch is Jesus had a different quality of childlike behavior in mind when he gave his followers this commandment. All too often it's not compliant, grateful children we resemble but spoiled brats.

I'm not referring to just church folk; certain presidential candidates have been acting like spoiled children this campaign season; today's newspaper is filled with examples of the self-centered, willful, childlike behavior of adults.

It's just that among that first circle of followers, their veering toward the hurtful and hateful was especially ironic: their on-going debate about who was the greatest, Peter's impulsive, misguided it's-all-about-me conduct, Judas' ultimate betrayal because Jesus did not conform to his personal, political agenda. If you were a centurion, greedy tax collector or megalomaniacal monarch such behavior might be expected but not if you followed a pacifist rabbi.

John has been criticized for what some have called an inward looking rather than an outward looking message; when his Jesus says “love one another” the clear meaning is to – love one another in the church. But Matthew’s, ‘love your neighbor’ and the example of the Good Samaritan is the church pointing beyond itself. There is, however, an irrefutable logic at work when Jesus starts with the inner circle – the ones who call themselves the church – to implement his strategy of love.

You see, what we do here Sunday in and Sunday out is to create a different kind of reality, a different world from the very secular one we enter when we walk out the door of this building.

What takes place here – a glimpse of which we get in the passing of the peace and prayers of the people – and what shapes the world Jesus called ‘the Kingdom of God’ is our obedience to his commandment to love. The same Jesus who said if you have a dispute with your brother or sister, lay down your gifts before you enter the temple and make peace. The commandment to love one another extends what Jesus said we should do when we enter the temple – make peace.

If it starts here, it flows out into the world. If the church can settle disputes within itself, then the world will see there is something different, something the world doesn’t have, at work in this community.

It is not by our impressive theology or glorious liturgy or the monuments we erect to honor God but by our ability to love one another that the world will recognize us as Jesus’ followers and the church will grow.

Yes, it’s easier to love those farther away – the poor homeless, the starving children or diseased in other nations. Loving those who are closer challenges us to live together with people we think don’t share our priorities or values. Singing a hymn together is one thing but let someone bring up a hot topic – charged political issues or controversial money matters – and our declarations of love wilt under the strain.

We cannot separate the story of Cain and Abel, that horrific moment of fratricide painful to look at even in our Genesis window which is the introduction of evil into human history – from this moment when Jesus gives his followers a new commandment which is the final remedy to the problem of evil in human history.

If the Bible is one long epic of the battle between these good and evil, then isn’t it the evil of refusing to love one another that plagues the human family from the beginning of history? Or said another way, isn’t it by loving one another that we would eradicate the evil of human violence?

When we choose to discount or ignore the image of God in another person – of any race, creed, ethnicity, age, gender or sexual orientation – we give credence to the idea that some people or particular person are not worthy and have fewer rights or value than other people. And from there it a small step to treating those people or that person as less than human. This is the slippery slope of bigotry and bias that leads to gang violence and spousal abuse, to bullying in schools and the workplace, and to terrorism, ethnic cleansing and genocide.

How do we love one another? Jesus does not say, "I give you a new commandment, that you should *like* one another." Liking and loving are very different. We don't have to like those we care called to love, but we do have to learn to love them.

It's easy to love those I like – we enjoy the same movies, the same jokes, the same books, columnists and so on. It's the people who don't appreciate Gail Collins or "New York" values or Jon Stewart that I struggle with.

What the struggle requires is a dialogue; first with myself, then with the other person. What is it that sets me off about the other? What can I do that would defuse my anger and fear and lead to deeper mutual understanding? The vibrancy and well-being of Christian congregations hangs on that kind of reflection and action.

We would not even consider loving one another were it not for the example of Jesus – who loves his enemies and executioners. The marvelous paradox in his example and our attempts to love one another is that we become more human when we do.

It is when our disagreement – and by the way there is nothing wrong with disagreement, the Jewish Talmud is founded upon healthy give and take – but it is when our disagreement with another person leads to our discounting their 'rights' or worth that we dehumanize them and ourselves.

Some of the worst examples are when Jews were isolated and exterminated in Germany or blacks in South Africa or Muslims or illegal immigrants; but it happens with equal virulence on a personal level as some candidates for president have demonstrated; nor are we immune – more than a few scholars and pundits have noted that the holocaust, apartheid, racist politicians and policies would not be possible were it not for the good people of the body politic. We kid ourselves if we think Jesus' commandment was intended for someone else.

We have been fortunate, for the most part, in this congregation not to have had divisive issues that, in other congregations cause splits and schisms. But that is not to say that we have nothing to learn or progress to make with Jesus' commandment.

We live busy lives. Perhaps the biggest Achilles heel of this congregation is how busy we are – it precludes depth of relationship and community building that makes for the kind of Christian community in which strangers are truly welcomed and real diversity of life style, values, and personal quirks and idiosyncrasies are welcomed rather than judged, given respect rather than a cold shoulder, and reached out to in time of need rather than rushing by like the Levite and priest on the road to Jericho.

Social media doesn't help; it replaces real time with virtual time; it condenses issues rather than opening them up to explore viable solutions and remedies; it shrinks or erases the richness of body language and non-verbal nuance in human interaction. This is the triumph of the excel spread-sheet in which everything has its little box and pre-determined time-frame; relationships are commodified into 'billable hours.' There was a time when doctors and lawyers gave you all the time you needed; they were our counselors, mentors, friends.

What I am saying is that there are powerful forces at work that erode the depth of caring and nurturing that church families and biological families require in order to thrive and grow.

The question is what would it take to open us up to one another – beyond the people here that we already know and like; what would it take to befriend and ‘love one another’ right here – the people sitting in this room?

It would take the willingness to get to know each other – to reach out to people you may see every Sunday but walk by because they are not in your knitting circle or garden group or committee. It would take time and curiosity and courage to be the first one to reach out. It would take the willingness to be vulnerable; to say to your new friend ‘I know what you mean, I’m struggling with the same issue.’ Or ‘I faced that very problem or one like it two years ago.’

I believe we have a pretty healthy social-ecosystem here at Westminster but I also think we have significant progress to make if we are to emulate and experience what those first century Christians created. Church historians have shown conclusively that the early church defeated the Roman Empire by caring for the sick and feeding the hungry, even those who were not part of their biological families.

In Rome, family determined your destiny. You had no obligations to anyone who was not your blood relative. But Christians considered themselves part of a new ‘family’ by virtue of their baptism, a new family called the body of Christ. ‘See how they love each other!’ pagans exclaimed.

The church presented the Empire with something it could never be: a strange new organization where human beings gathered and cared for each other not on the basis of gender, family, race, and class—the world’s way of gathering—but by obedience to the Lord of love.

If there is a more important rule or principle for us to embrace at this time in world history, our polarized nation’s history, our racially segregated city’s history; indeed, in this history of this congregation, I don’t know what it is.

Yes, we need pot luck suppers and extended coffee hours and small group meetings to create and nurture the kind of relationship building Jesus said was integral to our faith and to spreading good news beyond the walls of this church.

But we can start loving one another right now, today, – looking for opportunities to connect and deepen our relationships and interpersonal trust. Once we do, we will find not only new friends but word will spread that there’s something different, something wonderful about that church on Delaware Avenue. Amen.