

May 26, 2019

Acts 11: 1-18

Psalm 148

Revelation 21: 1-6

John 13: 31-35

In our reading from John today, Jesus is speaking to his disciples at the end of the last supper. He knows, though his disciples do not, that Judas will betray him and that he will be captured and murdered, and thus he is telling his followers how they must live without him. In a way, his knowledge of the events to come and what is to occur after them as well as his dictums to the disciples, form the basis for Christianity.

He says to them, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another.” And that is how the followers are to live, loving one another as Jesus loved them, and that is how they will recognize one another as well, by their loving behavior.

Well, that doesn't sound that difficult really, does it

““I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.”

Jesus tells us that everyone will know we are his disciples if we have love for one another. And it sounds quite simple, doesn't it? Just love.

Love your neighbor. Love yourself. Love your enemy. Love your spouse.

Love your friend. Love your bus driver, your mailman, your pharmacist.

Love everybody. Just love.

Now, some parts of that may be harder than other parts, right? Like, “Love your enemy.” But the overall gist: love—that's something we can affirm.

Love is the answer. Love that will form the basis of human community.

Love, like laughter, is contagious. Someone laughs, and we start to laugh, too—sometimes without even knowing what is so funny! And laughter spreads because we are connected to each other, part of social networks, in relationship. We humans fare better—and sometimes worse—because we are all connected to others. So creating and living within an atmosphere of love not only seems like it must be easy, but establishes the basis for the evolution of society.

The benefits of living a connected life outweigh the costs. If someone was always violent toward you, or gave you misinformation, or made you sad, or infected you with deadly germs—you would cut the ties to that person, and your network would disintegrate. So, the spread of good and valuable things is necessary to sustain and nourish social networks, our system of relationships. Social networks are necessary for spreading ideas, kindness, altruism, happiness, and love. And a network that's arranged one way can be healthy, innovative, cooperative, and kind. But, arranged another way—well, we are all hearing a lot about that recently.

The benefits of generous behavior toward one another are explored in a couple of books that were reviewed in a recent Economist magazine. One is called “The Goodness Paradox” and is about the distinctions between chimpanzees and bonobos. These are humanity's closest great-ape relatives - they share almost all their (and humans') DNA and they have familiar emotions and behavior. But, there is one important distinction. Chimpanzees exhibit routinely violent behavior, with males beating up females, fighting each other and killing rivals, and even friends and infants. Bonobos, on the other hand, enjoy relatively peaceful lives. One reason for the distinction is that they have evolved on opposite sides of the

Congo River. On their side, the chimpanzees must share their territory with gorillas with whom they vie for their livelihood; the bonobos, however, have been able to take advantage of the spoils of their environment with relatively little competition. Thus their propensity for reactive aggression has been reduced and they have been able to develop in a communal fashion.

So the bonobos have domesticated themselves in response to their environment just as have domestic animals like dogs or farm animals. Just as have humans. Throughout history, those with a greater capacity for tolerance and co-operation developed large stable settlements and civilizations, living together in closer quarters than any other large species could without dangerous consequences.

And the power of the teachings of Jesus is that they support this development toward mutually supportive and caring community. The love that Jesus talks about is a reciprocal love. It is not love that simply emanates from above, but is delivered and received simultaneously. We as humans are not passive acceptors of God's love, but deliverers of it as well. That is what has made civilization evolve, though, surely, there have been many backwards movements, many horrific detours on the path toward a loving world.

Had the chimpanzees and gorillas been able to exist cooperatively as the bonobos do, perhaps they could have created a more stable environment for themselves and developed a different nature. If humans can adhere to the way of love that Jesus exhorts his disciples to follow, perhaps we can

avoid the destruction that our history has often illustrated. For love is in many ways a matter of interpretation and imagination. The way of love as described in the Bible is a powerful, convincing and benign structure - a story that communicates truth but may not actually be factual. The creation story tells us that mankind has dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air and every living thing that moves upon the earth. We used to interpret that as meaning that we could despoil the earth, we could plunder whatever we wanted, we could squander our precious resources—but we are coming to see it as a command to be better stewards of our island home.

And it used to be thought that slavery was a God-given institution, that it was OK to kidnap people, rip them from their families and their homeland, and oppress them all the days of their lives—but we have come to see that we need to have respect for all human beings. Perhaps that is because the Way of Love has gradually shown us what is right.

We used to think that one's privilege and success were signs of God's favor, allowing one to condemn others less fortunate for not pulling themselves up by their own bootstraps—but we have come to see that same privilege and success as a means of empowering us to lift up others. Perhaps that is because the Way of Love has shown us what is good.

We used to think that women were to keep silent and be obedient to men, but we have increasingly come to see that we were all created of equal and immeasurable value.

Perhaps because the Way of Love has shown us what is just.

We used to believe a lot of things, things that caused us to oppress others, to disparage those different from ourselves, to ignore the refugee and stranger, to be fearful of the unknown—but with steps and missteps, we are learning to turn from those ways. This is an evolutionary progression and Jesus' teaching, to love one another, is a powerful asset in that progression. We all know that we fall back in various ways but the more that we attempt to retain the path, the path that allows us to walk in the way of love and cooperation with others, the more we will move forward toward supporting a nurturing world for all.

Jesus said, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another."

And we must try our best to do just that.

And now, in closing, a few relevant words from Maya Angelou:

Now if you listen closely  
I'll tell you what I know  
Storm clouds are gathering  
The wind is gonna blow  
The human race is suffering  
And I can hear the moan,  
'Cause nobody,  
But nobody  
Can make it out here alone.

And that, my dear friends, is why it is so wonderful that we all gather together here, practicing to make it together.

*The Economist*, May 4, 2019

*The Way of Love*, sermon from Barrie Bates, Episcopal minister

Maya Angelou, 1928-2014

