

THE HARD WORK OF LOVE

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: Psalm 148; John 13:31-35

On these Sundays after Easter, we have been treated to a variety of post resurrection appearances that leave the impression that the risen Lord is showing up in a lot of places and among surprised disciples. First, there was the story of the appearance to Thomas and the other disciples when Thomas was invited to touch the nail prints and put his hand in the side of the wounded but risen Jesus.

Then came the story of the miraculous draft of 153 fish and the barbecue breakfast with the risen Lord, Peter, and the others by the Sea of Galilee.

Saved for other years are such stories as the Emmaus road experience in which two disciples recognize Jesus when he explains the scriptures and breaks bread. No sooner do they realize the company that they are keeping than the risen Lord vanishes.

These ethereal sightings are usually marked by eerie circumstances as a hazy, gauzy, slightly out of focus resurrected Lord appears amidst the common day experiences of unsuspecting disciples. The point of these stories is usually to reinforce the idea that Jesus was seen and known in the days following the resurrection with varying evidences of his corporeal substance.

But today's lesson is not in that same vein at all. Rather than a resurrection appearance, today's scripture is taken from the farewell discourse, as Jesus' lengthy dinner speech over the last supper is known in John's gospel. It is a new teaching, Jesus says, but by now it has a familiar ring to it. "Little children," Jesus says to his grown up disciples, "I am with you only a little longer, so love one another as I have loved you. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

It's a touching farewell appeal. Something that opens the heart and touches the spirit of us all. Love one another, he said, as I have loved you. And certainly this is one of those passages of scripture that is so familiar that it becomes apt wording for a sampler on grandma's dining room wall, or as a greeting message in a Hallmark card on friendship. Familiar words exhorting us to love.

Of course, the familiarity of these words also has a numbing quality to it, we've heard them so often. *We ought to* love one another. So we teach the kids that lovely campfire song,

We are one in the spirit,
we are one in the Lord,
we are one in the spirit
we are one in the Lord,
and we pray that all unity
may one day be restored,

and they'll know we are Christians
by our love, by our love,
yes they'll know we are Christians
by our love.

Now what's interesting about this commandment that Jesus gives his disciples to love one another, a commandment that is a parting attempt to instill and review with them the essentials of what he wants them to remember, is its placement in the gospel. It immediately follows Jesus' betrayal by Judas.

In fact, the words come out of Jesus' mouth immediately following Judas' departure from the upper room. "Do quickly what you have to do," Jesus tells Judas, and Judas took the bread from Jesus' hand, and ran out into the darkness of the night to find his way to the council where they awaited his arrival.

The other bookend of this teaching on love which begins with Judas' betrayal, is Peter's denial. Jesus no sooner finishes his words to his disciples than they leave the upper room together, make their way to the garden across the Kidron Valley where he is arrested and then stands trial before the high priest. And as he does Peter denies that he even knows Jesus. "Are you not also one of this man's disciples?" the woman in the high priest's courtyard asks. "I am not," Peter said. "I am not." "I am not."

Jesus asks his disciples to do one thing, to love one another as he has loved them. By this, people will know that they are his disciples, Jesus says, if they love one another.

Some love! Judas betrays him, Peter denies him, and all fall away that night in the garden. At the cross, only Jesus' mother and the beloved disciple are anywhere to be found. The others are in hiding.

I suppose none of this was really news to Jesus. After all he was aware that his betrayer's hand was at the table with him. He even said so. And he told Peter that in spite of his protests to the contrary, Peter would deny him three times before cockcrow.

There had been indications all along that the choice of these twelve was not without its challenges. The gospels are replete with stories of the disciples' pettiness, their lack of faith, their inability to pick up the mantle and cast out demons or perform miracles, their backbiting, their jockeying for position. Even Peter, supposedly the best of the lot, couldn't accept Jesus' repeated explanation that the Son of Man must, suffer and die. And so he tried to dissuade Jesus from his course of action, which frustrated Jesus no end; enough so that he rebuked Peter, called him *Satan*, and told him to get out of his way.

The inner circle of James and John, were diminished by the fact that their mother wanted to get advance seating arrangements for them at the heavenly banquet, a move that left the other disciples jealous and bickering among themselves.

The disciples were a rag tag army of ill fitting, irritable, dissimilar people. As a group they were a lot like... a lot like... the church, come to think of it. Basically good, but deeply flawed.

And while the passage that we read today trips off the tongue in a kind of benign and comfortable way, "Love one another as I have loved you," it is a commandment that is easier said than done; easier heard than fulfilled.

In fact, I am convinced that it is not only not easy for us to love one another, it was never easy for Jesus to love his disciples. I think it was a trial at times. Thirteen men traveling around the countryside of Galilee and Judea, going from town to village to roadside weigh station to wilderness outpost. I don't know about you but I think a real test of patience if not friendship is *traveling* with people.

You know you sign up for one of those tours with your college or the AARP or the Metropolitan Museum, and you're on the bus from early morning till late evening, arriving at the hotel, getting on and off at sites all day long. And somebody in the group is always late getting back to the bus, or oversleeps in the morning. Someone is always asking idiotic questions like, "When did you say the war of 1812 was?"

Or you're on one of those sea cruises where they put you at a table with people who are impossible and with whom you have nothing in common, and with whom you will be eating every lunch and dinner for the next ten days!

The disciples were an unlikely lot, several fishermen, a tax collector, a crook who was the treasurer, a member of a subversive political party, a pair of twins; they didn't necessarily have a lot in common these folks except for, of course, Jesus. Which is why they were like the church.

The church is a group of people who would not necessarily have chosen to be together in quite this way were it not for the one in whose name we gather, and who has called us to be the church, to be together, as his body.

I think that it was hard for Jesus to love the disciples, not easy. As hard for him as it was for them to love one another. What was hard for him was to see the potential, the possibility of what they might be, and to know that they fell so short. I think it was hard because he knew how much depended on them, and how difficult it would be for them to live up to that. And it was hard because he knew how given to pettiness and jealousy and bullheadedness and sin that they were prone to be, and how far short they fell from the mark.

But in spite of all that, Jesus loved them. He loved them because he believed that together they were a sum that was greater than its parts. That together they were better than they were alone. That maybe, just maybe, they might rise above their pettiness and bickering and limitations and achieve something that had the love of God in it. Something that had his love in it and in so doing they might just love one another.

Somehow it helps me to know that it wasn't easy for Jesus to love his disciples, that he had to work at it the way I have to work at it, because all too often I get discouraged by the frailty and brokenness and painful humanity of those whom God has called into the church.

This is, after all, not my group. I wouldn't have gotten these folks together. But God has. And that's the difference. God has. And God has hopes for us. God has dreams for us. God desires more for us than we have dared think possible for ourselves. And God will not give up on us. God even wants us to love one another.

"Love one another as I have loved you," Jesus said. And how was that? How was it that he loved them? How is it that he loves us? Enough to die for us. Enough to give his life for our sake. Enough to go to a cross so that our broken, sinful, nature might be redeemed.

Enough to put up with us, too. And if Jesus could love his disciples, in spite of all their painful humanity, then we can love one another in the same way, in spite of all our painful humanity.

Fred Craddock, one of America's finest preachers and former professor of homiletics at Emory University writes in his biography about his father. His father was an alcoholic and a heavy smoker the product of rural Tennessee born on the cusp of the 19th Century becoming the 20th. He had difficulty holding a job because of his drinking, and his children lived in abject poverty, sometimes without shoes, often with little to eat, sleeping three to a bed, and sometimes living in fear of their father's rages and angers, though there was never physical or verbal abuse of either the children or Fred's mother.

Fred's father kept the church at bay, and had little good to say of the pastors who would come from time to time to visit Fred's mother at home. Fred thought his father always hid during those visits lest there be some unpleasantness about his drinking. Certainly his father had no time for the do-gooders and hypocrites that made up their local Disciples of Christ congregation in Humboldt.

It was more Fred's mother's example that led him to ministry and kept him in church as he grew up. It was his father's garrulous gift for gab and tall tales that gave Fred the gift of storytelling. She gave him the Word, Fred says, and his father gave him the words.

More to the point, Fred tells a story about the church and the love of those disciples who finally got through to his father at the end of his life. Craddock writes:

[Daddy] was dying of cancer of the throat [in the Veteran's Hospital in Memphis]. He had been treated with radiation and surgery, leaving him quite weak, unable to eat, unable to speak, but fully able to feel pain. On a table by his bed was a stack of get-well cards, every one of which came from persons and groups in Central Avenue Christian Church, the church he often criticized and whose ministers he belittled in their efforts to reclaim him. Daddy saw me looking through the cards, and unable to

speak, he scribbled on the side of a tissue box a line from *Hamlet*: “In this harsh world draw your breath in pain and tell my story.” I wrote, “And what is your story, Daddy?” He wrote, “I was wrong.”

[Fred goes on] I did not return to seminary until after his funeral a few days later. The service was held in Central Avenue Christian Church during which the congregation sang his favorite hymn, “When Peace Like a River.” Daddy was sixty-three years old.¹

The church is not always easy to get in or stay in. Sometimes it’s difficult for an outsider to come in, because they don’t feel worthy, or they don’t feel welcome, or they don’t feel ready. Sometimes it’s hard to stay in because the company you have to keep is so trying.

But then along comes this story of Jesus bookended by betrayal that expresses Jesus’ best and fondest hope for us, that we love one another as he has loved us. He thinks we can do it. And it helps me to know that it wasn’t easy, even for him, because it isn’t easy for us. Love one another as I have loved you, he urged us. *As I have loved you*. With patience, forgiveness, forbearance, peace of spirit, and a willingness to take the bad with the good.

Maybe Jesus had to tell us to do this because on our own we might not try. We might give up. But for his sake we might attempt it, loving one another.

And who knows, maybe he is right. If we do so perhaps everyone *will* know that we are disciples. It’s about as sure a sign as there can be... that we love one another *as he has loved us*.

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¹ *Reflections on My Call to Preach*. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2009. 45-46