

Acts 10:44-48
Psalm 98
1 John 5:1-6
JOHN 15:9-17

“Go and bear fruit”

Imagine that you are seated with Jesus at his final Passover Seder – indeed, his final meal before his death – around a table in an upper room in Jerusalem, at a secure, undisclosed location. Imagine how aware you are of the threats being made to Jesus’ life, of the adulation of him by some of the crowds packing the holy city for the holy season, and of your own befuddlement and that of your fellow disciples at his profound words. Imagine how much you are in denial concerning his impending death. How much can you focus on the vast depth and breadth of Jesus’ eloquent soliloquy, which goes on for Chapters 14-17 in John’s Gospel?

There’s a lot for us to “read, mark, learn and inwardly digest” in what scholars call Jesus’ “farewell discourse.” Let me pick out three themes, three commandments of his from these chapters, two of which are in today’s excerpt. First, Jesus said, “Believe in God, believe also in me.” Second, Jesus said, “Love one another as I have loved you.” Third, Jesus said, “Go and bear fruit.” Believe, love, bear fruit.

Polls tell us that over 80% of Americans “believe in God,” but that includes those who believe in Krishna, various other “gods” or who think *they* are god. Jesus is speaking about belief in God as revealed in the Bible and as worshipped by those who proclaim the God of the Bible to be one, and the supreme focus of devotion and obedience – not one among other focuses, or a “side order” on the “menu” of our devotions which has ourselves or money (for example) as the “entrée.” “Believe in God:” other beliefs are secondary.

“Believe also in Jesus.” John’s Gospel quotes Jesus making a series of profound and radical statements, including “I am the light of the world,” “I am the Way, the Life and the Truth”, “I am the Bread of Life,” “I am the Good Shepherd,” and “I am the resurrection and the life.” These statements are either true or false; there is no middle ground. We cannot “cop out” and say that Jesus is a “great moral teacher” with wise sayings that we should consider. No; either he was – and is – who he says he is, or he was a deluded and dangerous fraud. Believing in Jesus means accepting him as Savior and Lord: nothing less. John’s Gospel is quite confrontational on this.

It doesn’t get easier when we come to the next commandment: “Love one another as I have loved you.” This is not “Valentine’s Day” love, obviously: Jesus was not romantically involved with anyone, despite Dan Brown’s fanciful delusions. It is not even friendship love, which he does refer to in today’s Gospel. This is “love to the max,” love when the situation calls for it (not just when we “feel like it”), love when others *need*

it, *not* just when they are being lovable. In fact, this kind of love can include “tough love,” saying “no,” telling people things they don’t want to hear but need to hear, helping them to focus on essentials and not distractions even if they are trying their best to avoid doing so.

This kind of love is called *agape* in Greek, and I call it “4 wheel drive love,” because sometimes we get off the road we expected to be on in life and without “four wheel drive love” we won’t get anywhere at all. And neither will the person or people we care about.

In this simple and scary phrase, Jesus takes self-giving love to the ultimate level: “love one another” – fellow Christians – “*as I have loved you.*” This, spoken as he was about to give his life so that “all who believe in him should not perish, but have eternal life.” In case anyone missed – or tried to avoid – his point, Jesus added, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

Most of us, thankfully, don’t have to face situations like this. There are people in the military who have fallen on grenades which otherwise might have killed or maimed their entire squad. There also have been Christians who refused to betray their fellow Christians when under severe persecution which cost them their own lives – and not just in the time of the Roman Empire. There were also Christians who expanded “love one another” beyond the Christian Community to hide Jews from the Nazis at great personal risk to themselves.

When we are commanded by Our Lord to step up to love at *that* level, the more routine, very modest kinds of love we frequently have the opportunity to show to other members of our Christian community – like the local parish – seem like the least we should do. Churches are not just collections of individual households which happen to gather for worship; churches are communities.

So, serving as part of a rotation of greeters or ushers or Altar Guild Members? Be willing to offer a fellow parishioner a ride to church from time to time? Sending “get well” cards? Helping for the reception after a funeral? All good things to do rather than say, “I’m too busy” or “Somebody else can do my part of the church’s ministry to my fellow members.”

After all, we have a Book of Common Prayer today in part because people like Archbishop Cranmer were willing to be burned at the stake for the faith. We have the Bible today because countless followers of Christ were willing to hide manuscripts from those who wanted to exterminate the church, and instead exterminated them. And the first person who translated the Bible into English, William Tyndale? He was burned at the stake by the King.

Faith is a team sport. Few of us, hopefully, will be asked to make the ultimate sacrifice of loving others at the cost of our lives; all of us can show our love for our fellow Christians by doing *something*. The opportunities are both specific and limitless.

But love, of course, does not stop with our fellow Christians. Jesus said, “Go and bear fruit” and he set no limits on who would benefit by the fruitfulness of our labors of love for others. Especially today, Rogation Sunday, when in our prayers [and in our hymns] we remember our joyful duty to be good stewards of the entire Creation, let us all understand that while our love can reach out to all human beings, it is not supposed to be limited to human beings.

“Bearing fruit” can involve giving or delivering furniture and household goods to a family moving into its first safe home after being in a shelter for survivors of domestic violence. “Bearing fruit” can mean sharing food with the Food Banks, serving at Elijah’s Promise Soup kitchen, or helping with the winter-time overflow from the Men’s Shelter in New Brunswick. “Bearing fruit” can also mean giving blood, serving as a foster parent, doing a 12-step visit to someone who really needs hope for new life after wrestling with addiction, or even letting go of an old building like the former All Saints’ Episcopal Church in Highland Park, which will now be renovated into studio apartments for homeless veterans.

“Bearing fruit” can also mean adopting a homeless dog or cat or caring for one in a shelter, working to save endangered species, or reducing carbon emissions or other pollutants. “Loving your neighbor as yourself” and “treat others as you would want to be treated” is not limited just to our own species. We better get used to this now, so that when we meet other species from other worlds we don’t treat them like most European invaders treated the Native Americans. Instead, “Live long and prosper,” fellow creatures of God.

Believe. Love. Bear fruit. That was the journey the new, Gentile believers converted and baptized in today’s reading from Acts were beginning, and that is the journey Ashley Silva is beginning today [at 10:30]. God only knows how many ways she will carry out those commandments. Let us be the kind of Christian community that will help her to reach for the stars while nurturing all the lives she touches.

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