

How will they know us?

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Fifth Sunday of Easter, April 24, 2016.

Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. John 13:34-35

Jesus gives us the new commandment to love one another as he has loved us. *Novum Mandatum* is the Latin for a new mandate given into our hands. Christ gives us a new commandment to love each other as he loves us. This is not a just a suggestion; it is a commandment. If we can't love or even like people, we can learn to respect them as fellow human beings and wish them well. If we fail to do that, we fall short of our love for God.

The great hymn we sing at the beginning of the Eucharist known as the *Gloria in Excelsis* is based on the hymn of the angels in Luke's record of the birth of Jesus. Luke 2:14 The *Gloria* was originally set at the beginning of the old Latin mass, but in early editions of the English and American Prayer Books it was moved to the end as a post communion prayer of thanksgiving. In our present Book of Common Prayer it has been restored to its original place at the beginning of the Eucharist.

The first stanza is addressed to God and is based on the ancient Jewish messianic song in praise to God for our redemption. The second stanza is based on the Eastern hymns *Kyrie* and *Agnus Dei* to emphasize the passion of Christ. The third stanza is taken from the Eastern liturgies to emphasize the presence of Christ in the elements of bread and wine. God coming to us in Christ is itself a song of praise. It celebrates that God became what we are that we might become more like God. When we learn what it means to love others for their own sake we live out the meaning of the passage in the birth narratives, *Glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth.*

Our greatest tribute to the glory of God in Christ is when we learn to love and respect each other as people of God in spite of our differences. In the same way that Christ is glorified in obedience to God, Christ is glorified by our obedience to him. It is easy for us to love those who love us. Our challenge is to learn to love and respect those who make it difficult to love them. Love and liking is not the same. We aren't expected to like everyone but we can learn to respect difficult people and wish them well. This requires the discipline of sacrificial love, a distinguishing mark of the Christian. It is all the more important in a world in which hatred and violence have become so evident.

It is a great mystery how God can be both powerful, majestic and judging while at the same time is personally close, compassionate and forgiving. Someone once said that God loves each and every one of us as if there were only one of us to love. Think of those who aggravate you by their presence. It is humbling to remember that God loves them as much as you. Christ died for them as well as for you. Our love of difficult people allows the spark of the divine to enable us to do what we aren't willing to do on our own.

The measure of our faith is not how much scripture we can quote, how often we attend church or by how many acts of kindness we do. The best measure of our faith is how well we can learn to love the unlovable. Our capacity for sacrificial love is greater than we think. It is neither a natural inclination nor an acquired skill, but a gift of grace.

We can thank God for those who know us best and still love us when we are at our worst. Were it not for our capacity for self-knowledge, we would not be free to love anyone because we would see too much of ourselves in them. Christ-like love is not blind, it sees everything and continues to love in spite of it. We first learned what it means to be loved from our parents who raised us. They didn't always like us, but they loved us from the day we were born. They may not have always said it, but we knew that their love for us was sacrificial.

In marriage and partnerships, love does not try to change each other; it accepts us as we are while encouraging the best in us. Think of who has been the most influence in your growth as a person. What did they do or say that helped you to develop your capacity to love? You may not even have realized what it was that kept you going when you were discouraged and felt let down, but it carried you through a difficult time.

The church need a strategy for mission and our Diocese and our Vestry are working on one. I was at a conference last week at which our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry told us that today's gen X and millennial generations that were born during the 70's, 80's and 90's link Christianity with words such as judgment and homophobia. The great division in Christianity is over unqualified and unconditional acceptance of all people while some would put limitations on God's love.

Bishop Curry reminded us that the words evangelism and the Episcopal Church are rarely found in the same sentence. We need to be part of what he calls the Jesus movement. Our future depends on making the expansive love of Christ known in positive ways. We are a work in progress and God is not finished with us.

In parts of Africa, where Christianity has grown more rapidly than any other part of the world, their mission strategy is done in a very simple way. One or two Christian families move into a village and when the villagers see how they care for each other, they are drawn to be part of their faith and life. It sounds simplistic, but the best way to teach is by example. Years ago, there was a popular Christian song that was sung at our wedding:

We pray that all unity may one day be restored and they'll know we are Christians by our love. We will work with each other, we will work side by side and we'll guard each one's dignity and save each one's pride and they'll know we are Christians by our love. We will walk with each other; we will walk hand in hand. Together we'll spread the news that God is in our land. They will know we are Christians by our love.