
Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Revised Common Lectionary which is the official source of our assigned readings on Sunday mornings designates John as the Gospel to be read on the weekdays during Holy Week every year. This evening's appointed text comes from a section of John's account called the "farewell discourses." In this particular case, we are presented with an account of the last supper of Jesus with his closest associates. Jesus has already washed the feet of his disciples, Judas has departed to betray him and his identity is revealed, and the rest are in a state of confusion. In these teachings which are directed not to the crowds but rather to his disciples themselves, Jesus addresses a series of realities and concerns: the fact that he is going away, that his disciples cannot follow him, and what this will mean for them (for their future lives, the way they will experience sorrow and joy as a result, and what the nature of their mission is to be in his absence).

In this group of teachings, the author of John's gospel appears to be obsessed with the concept of "glory." In fact, the fourth gospel is often referred to as the "gospel of glory and love." What John is referring to with this term is the glory of God which is inherent in the Son but is only fully revealed in the resurrection and God's ultimate vindication before the world that condemned the Word made flesh. Also here is a fuller development of the idea of the Holy Spirit as *Paraclete* or advocate for the disciples in the absence of their Lord.

In Leviticus, the Israelites were commanded to love their neighbors as a way of recalling the way they were treated as slaves in Egypt and the need to avoid repeating the unfriendly stance of their oppressors. Here, however, when Jesus speaks of love for the other, he is expanding that idea and also limiting it. He is expanding its meaning in telling the disciples that the kind of love he has in mind is the kind he himself demonstrates as a model for them. And the love he is referring to is not a generalized love for mankind but rather love *for one another*. And this focus on mutual love within the local group of Jesus followers is understandable. The community of John was under assault by orthodox Jews who were expelling them from the synagogues. Their very identity was threatened, so they huddled together in self-defense; their survival would depend upon the sustaining power of love for one another which was the more limited meaning Jesus had in mind in expressing the "love commandment."

The love commandment is not new, of course. It was already part of the Jewish tradition and was even well-known in the Greco-Roman world. So, in a larger sense, of course, it is also true that "it is quite simply by (their) loving acts" that his followers -- the early Church -- would come to be known. Jesus, after all, was also declaring God's love for the world. In this sense, loving each other was a "precursor of the spread of Christianity." While we might have expected Jesus to speak about the evil committed by Judas, that is not what he does. Instead, he focuses on his mission and preparing his

beloved disciples for the new world soon to be experienced by them in his absence. And although Peter will deny him, the parting words of Jesus do not focus on blame but rather preparation for the time to come.

"Jesus went to the cross to show in word and deed that God is love and that we, as God's children, are loved. So, whether we succeed or fail in our attempts to love one another...yet God in Jesus loves us more than we can possibly imagine. And hearing of that love is what sets us free and sent forth to love another." And for John, the mission of the Church is "showing the world the Light of Christ." As Martin Luther King, Jr. put it so eloquently in describing the end goal of his fight for desegregation in the U.S., the business of the church "is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the Beloved Community. Further, *agape* love does not begin by discriminating between worthy and unworthy people...it begins by loving others for their sakes (and) makes no distinction between a friend and an enemy; it is directed toward both...*Agape* is love seeking to preserve and create community."

In the words of a pre-eminent New Testament scholar, "to interpret Jesus' death as the *ultimate act of love* enables the believers to see that the love to which Jesus summons the community is not the giving up of one's life, but the giving away of one's life. The distinction between these prepositions is important, because the love that Jesus embodies is *grace, not sacrifice*. Jesus gave his life to his disciples as an expression of the fullness of his relationship with God and of God's love for the world. Jesus' death in love, therefore, was not an act of self-denial, but an act of fullness, of living one's life and identity fully, even when that living would ultimately lead to death."

"I'm giving you a new commandment, and it is this: love one another! Just as I have loved you, so you must love one another. This is how everybody will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for each other."
(John 13: 34-35)

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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