

## Sunday, May 19, 2019 The Fifth Sunday of Easter

### The First Reading is Psalm 148:1-14

<sup>1</sup> Praise the LORD. Praise the LORD from the heavens; praise him in the heights above. <sup>2</sup> Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his heavenly hosts. <sup>3</sup> Praise the LORD, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars. <sup>4</sup> Praise him, you highest heavens and you waters above the skies. <sup>5</sup> Let them praise the name of the LORD, for at his command they were created, <sup>6</sup> and he established them forever and ever—he issued a decree that will never pass away. <sup>7</sup> Praise the LORD from the earth, you great sea creatures and all ocean depths, <sup>8</sup> lightning and hail, snow and clouds, stormy winds that do his bidding, <sup>9</sup> you mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars, <sup>10</sup> wild animals and all cattle, small creatures and flying birds, <sup>11</sup> kings of the earth and all nations, you princes and all rulers on earth, <sup>12</sup> young men and women, old men and children. <sup>13</sup> Let them praise the name of the LORD, for his name alone is exalted; his splendor is above the earth and the heavens. <sup>14</sup> And he has raised up for his people a horn, the praise of all his faithful servants, of Israel, the people close to his heart. Praise the LORD.

### The Second Reading is the Gospel of John 13:31-35

<sup>31</sup> When Judas was gone, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man is glorified and God is glorified in him. <sup>32</sup> If God is glorified in him, God will glorify the Son in himself, and will glorify him at once. <sup>33</sup> "My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come. <sup>34</sup> "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. <sup>35</sup> By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

### The Message is Entitled *Timeless*

What an amazing week at the Festival of Homiletics in Minneapolis. The whole week, and I mean the **whole** week, with all its worship and preaching, lectures and concerts, could be summed up in our timeless message from our Gospel text today - "Love one another." Now don't take this the wrong way, as I am certainly not implying that the week was a broken record of repetitive messages regurgitating the same thing over and over again. Each sermon had a fresh perspective given the lens of a particular text; yet each sermon was a call to action, an urgent plea for the people of God to love as Jesus loved.

The message was loud and clear to us preacher types, don't let yourself or the people you lead be lulled into complacency or despondency given the state of affairs in our world. Equip and inspire the people you lead to be Christ to this hurting world. That is, help them to love one another as Christ has loved them now!

Jesus said to his disciples, "I give you a new commandment, that is to love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." You may have noticed that Jesus is instructing his disciples to love each other. Yet, Jesus doesn't say anything about loving all others, those beyond the inner circle of disciples. Yet, in the larger context of John's Gospel we can't disregard what Jesus said earlier in the Gospel in Chapter 3: "For God so loved the world..."

This "new commandment" has a twist, but the command to love is not so new. In Deuteronomy we are urged to love God and in Leviticus we are urged to love neighbor and now in the context of this gospel the disciples are urged to love one another. Jesus' love though, as demonstrated in the gospels, knows no bounds. It is not based on group or clan. And it is certainly not based on the merit of the recipients. This love invites, but it does not demand. It transcends and persists regardless of circumstances. This love to which we are called, is self-emptying, as modeled by Jesus life and ministry. Yet, to love one another as Jesus loved is not so simple.

To place our text this morning in context, it is a fragment of Jesus' farewell speech to his disciples on the night of his arrest. He has gathered his disciples for the Passover. He knows what is before him. He knows who will betray him and deny him. Even so, Jesus "removes his outer robe and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet." Then Jesus says to his disciples, "Do as I have done."

Are you beginning to see what it means to love like Jesus? It means to be willing to do the mundane, willing to do the stuff that we may not be in our pay grade, that is beneath us so to speak. A house servant would have done this task for guests, but not the guest of honor. Jesus continues to teach through his actions and words, saying a little later in his farewell speech, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." This self-emptying love we are to emulate is mundane as well as heroic and every shade in between.

This love that Jesus is talking about is not a sentiment; it is a choice. This love is not a mushy Hallmark card; it is a deliberate action. Love, as Apostle Paul says to the followers of Christ in Corinth, is not envious, boastful, or proud. It does not devalue or dishonor others. It is not arrogant or self-promoting. It doesn't keep a record of wrongs, nor it is easily angered. And it certainly does not delight in evil.

Are you beginning to understand the challenge I heard this past week? Get out there and love people! Preach in a way that motivates the people you lead to get out there and love people in this present age!

So, I am going to follow the wisdom of theologian Karl Barth who said in 1966 that, "The pastor and the faithful should not deceive themselves into thinking that they are a religious society, which has to do with certain themes; they live in the world. We still need - according to my old formulation - the Bible and the newspaper." (<http://barth.ptsem.edu/about-cbs/faq>)

We shouldn't deceive ourselves into thinking we do this thing called church just for ourselves. We don't just gather for worship to feel good and then go about our comfortable lives. We don't just gather to sustain this particular institution called the First Presbyterian Church of Redlands. We don't even just gather to worship and glorify and adore God. We gather to be transformed by the power and glory of the God whom we worship, so that by the Spirit at work within us we will have the courage to respond to what we see and hear. That is why Barth said we need the Bible and the newspaper. We cannot cut ourselves off from what is happening all around us. Jesus went to the people. We must too.

Let me lift up some of our headlines in light of this love to which we are called. This love would not sit on the sidelines while children and youth are sexually trafficked worldwide or while children and youth are separated from their families at the border. This love does not blindly ignore the reality of those without homes or those locked behind bars in prisons by devaluing their worth. This love does not ignore the epidemic of loneliness that spirals into despair and even the tragedy of suicide. This love does not stand idle in the face of systemic racism, sexism, ageism, materialism, and militarism – in the face of systems of domination that reward the few at the expense of the many. This love does not demean those whose religious or political beliefs differ from our own.

I know I am meddling and that is what every single preacher did this past week as I worshipped and heard the word proclaimed, for I heard again and again calls to actions. Rev. Dr. James Forbes, the 6<sup>th</sup> prophetic pastor of the Riverside Church, which is located across from Wall Street in Manhattan proclaimed, "God needs a dream a team!" God needs you!

Preachers throughout the week reminded us again and again that this new commandment to love one another, should shake us from our places of comfort and compel us to love one another evermore faithfully - the sick and the dying, the addicted and depressed, the discarded and ignored, the self absorbed, the self-righteous, the wealthy and powerful, the power brokers, even the unjust, and the list went on and on.

How shall followers of Christ be known? “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” I wonder if there is enough evidence to convict us? Is there enough evidence of our love for one another that is visible to our community? Do others know that we love one another? Do others experience Christ’s love through us?

What’s disturbing is that love doesn’t make the list when people on the street are asked, “What words come to mind when you hear the word Christian?” We’ve had a lot of bad press over the years and still do! Christian churches fight with each other over issues doctrine and dogma, ordination and inclusion. Sexual scandals and misconduct by pastors and priests have deeply wounded countless individuals and as well as the institutions. So, it should not surprise us that words like judgmental, hypocritical and anti-gay often make the top three, rather than love. I couldn’t find the survey I remembered seeing in the 1990’s, but a positive descriptor didn’t show up in the first 15 words! And our press hasn’t got much better in the last 30 years. Christians in the media are more often known more for what they are against rather than what they are for. We have spent so much more time bickering with our neighbors than loving them (all our neighbors, not just some of our neighbors), that love has taken a backseat.

The festival preachers were clear: This new commandment is a priority now! We must work to overcome the insidious hate permeating our culture with love. We need to engage others by listening more and speaking less. We need to topple unjust systems of power with actions, not just words, in order to foster equality and justice. We need to intentionally enact love in all that we do.

But, I can hear your thoughts. The problems facing us today are just too big. What can only one person do? What can I do given my age and stage of life that would have any significant impact?

Do you remember Jesus’ love in action from mundane to heroic? Some of us may have the opportunity for heroics at some point in our lives, but I imagine most of us have mundane opportunities to put love into action everyday! The challenge is to be open to the possibilities and to act.

I made my way from the hotel to the light rail by walking eight blocks on Saturday morning. As is always the case, I just missed the blue line I needed. So, I waited another ten minutes for the next light rail. I boarded with my luggage and backpack and sat down. Across from me another man sat down with his tent neatly packed and a large gym bag. He began the conversation saying to me, “Heading to the airport?” Everyone on the light rail had their earphones in and their heads down, hoping not to have to engage anyone in conversation. This man noticed I didn’t have or do either. So, our conversation began and I asked him about the winters in Minneapolis. He offered that he stayed in a shelter all winter, not in his tent. He shared that he decided about a week ago to start sleeping outside again. Then he beamed saying, “I just got approved for section eight housing.”

“Awesome!”, was my response, because I know from experience what this means. Then we talked about how he might choose his housing and who might be able to help him. We were interrupted by his stop and we shared good byes.

I have to tell you my first thought after his departure, for I said to God, “I just experienced the Christ in the other.” I don’t have any idea how our conversation will impact his search for his housing, but I know our conversation shifted something within me and my spirit was lightened for my day of travel. It didn’t take much for me to value the dignity of this man, to love him as Jesus did. It just took a willingness to be open to his question. My pump had been primed so to speak by five days of preaching that said to me get out there and love on people.

Friends, we have to ever more intentionally choose to love one another, if we want to be faithful followers of Jesus. Jesus loved on his disciples despite their betrayals and denials.

Despite all the betrayals and denials in our own lives, we must choose to love. Yes, the problems in our world are legion and often overwhelming, but listen deeply to the Spirit’s stirrings within you. What breaks your heart? What moves you to compassion? What injustice angers and energizes you to

respond? We can't just be spectators, if we claim to follow Jesus. Jesus didn't just sit in one spot, he moved and then moved again encountering people along the way.

This message of love is timeless, yet it is needed more than ever right now! How will you choose to love, as Jesus loved us, today, tomorrow, every single day? Choose love now! Amen.