

Reflection for May 15, 2022

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

I heard a story once about a rather bubbly administrative assistant for a parish who regularly answered the phone with, "St. John's Parish, Sharon speaking, Jesus loves you!" This one particular day, she got a little confused and said, "St. John's Parish, Jesus speaking, Sharon loves you!" I expect we have all made a slip when answering a phone call. I know I have. But perhaps this wasn't as much of a slip as we first think it was.

Today's Gospel passage highlights a new commandment Jesus gave his disciples; to love one another. The text is continuation of Jesus' last supper with his beloved followers. Jesus knew his end was near. His disciples likely knew something was up too, just by some of the things that had happened recently, and some of the things Jesus had said and done. The last few years had been anything but predictable, but their lives were going to take an unprecedented turn in the next few days. They certainly didn't know the details of what was going to happen but were eager to find out.

Jesus and his disciples were gathered around the table for a meal together. I can imagine all the thoughts, ideas and emotions that might have been swirling around in Jesus' head. Fully human, he would have experienced a full range of emotions. Fully divine, he knew he wouldn't be around much longer, and that his earthly mission was almost complete. Perhaps he was feeling a measure of grief and sadness, knowing what his followers would soon have to go through. Perhaps he worried about their full understanding of his teachings, his way of living. The time for Jesus to teach them was running out. I wonder if he consciously told himself that it would have to be enough. That it was going to be alright in the end. The rest was going to be up to the Holy Spirit to teach and guide them. But yet, he had this one last night with them.

As they gathered, Jesus washed their feet, displaying humility and servanthood. Toward the end of their meal together, Judas stood up with the intent to betray him. Jesus let him go peacefully. Then it was night.

Then it was night. Quite a dramatic phrase to end this section of the text from last week! Was this a premonition of what was to come? It's as if a darkness had enveloped them in a way they had not know before. Jesus knew this was a darkness they could not escape, but had to

endure. They had to go through it together. How could he help them? What words could he leave to encourage them?

2. I expect many of you have wondered about what to say when you have parted with someone you love. Most of us have family living in other parts of the country, and even other parts of the world. When they leave, we may want to say something profound, something that would help them remember us. Especially if it's at a significant life event, like a child leaving for university, or moving to another city in pursuit of their first real job.

Some of us have spent time at the bedside of someone facing death. What would we want to say? What would we want to hear? Or what did we say? What did we hear?

In my work as a Spiritual Health Practitioner, I have often coached families when they are struggling with what to say to a dying loved one. It has been said there are 5 things a dying person may need to hear: Thank you, forgive me, I forgive you, I love you, and goodbye.

As the Messiah, Jesus had no need to say all five of these things, but he did want them to know the last three: I forgive you, I love you, and goodbye. But what does it mean to love someone, to really love someone, as Jesus was commanding?

The world often presents the view of love being an eternal, airy-fairy feeling that the other person is perfect, and that our soul mate will complete us. When they show their imperfection, we are offended. In the movies, love is often sexualized, and romanticized, when we are drawn to the other person with an irresistible urge to give ourselves to them and be with them forever.

Even *philia* love, which is caring for our friends and those around us, is often sentimentalized. It is presented as a feeling, such as, "My heart goes out to those poor people!" or "It's so sad to see what is happening in Ukraine!" or "I love spending time with you!"

There's nothing wrong with those sentiments, they are a genuine expression of a kind of love, but I would say they are incomplete. The emotion expressed is love, but is that what Jesus was referring to? Is this emotion all there is? I encourage you to see that there is more.

3. And it was night. *Pause.* It is in this darkness where our text begins. Rather than reacting to Judas and the awful actions he was to carry out, Jesus focusses on being glorified and how God would be glorified through his crucifixion and resurrection. He accepted that Judas was going to do what he was going to do, and even dismissed him to carry out his betrayal. And so began Jesus' final steps toward the cross. And then it was night.

Knowing how hard the next while would be for his disciples, he turned to them and spoke to them using the tender language of a caring parent. "Little children" he said. "I am with you only a little longer, and where I am going, you cannot come."

This sets the tone for the key words in this passage, the new commandment, "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

Jesus' love for his disciples was selfless, profound, patient, kind, . . . I could go on, but let's just say it was perfect. He demonstrated that love by washing the feet of his followers and feeding them, including the one who would be his betrayer, even as he was preparing to face death.

Jesus knew the full story of what was going to happen and knew the pain and the turmoil his followers would be facing. He knew the disciples would struggle with fear and anger – emotions that often overrun the desire to love. Jesus was reminding his followers of this commandment to love one another, even if they were afraid or angry. They would need the support of the group to get through the coming days and to continue to bring Jesus' way of living to the world. They would need to love each other to continue God's mission.

4. It's almost unbelievable to think of loving another person whom we know is going to betray us. In fact, it is completely unbelievable to imagine loving someone as Jesus did, but that is what Jesus commands us to do.

Is that really a *new* commandment though? Even in the Old Testament book of Leviticus, God commands the Israelites to "Love your neighbour as yourself." My mother often quoted the Golden Rule to me, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." All of the major world religions have a version of this rule for living,

Judaism: "What is hateful to you do not do to your neighbour. This is the whole Torah; all the rest is commentary."

Islam: “None of you truly believes until you wish for others what you wish for yourself.”

Hinduism: “This is the sum of the Dharma: do naught to others that which would cause pain if done to you.”

So, what is new about this commandment? And what does it mean for us today?

In Matthew’s account of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus challenges us to love not only our neighbours, but our enemies as well. This was a new, and very difficult way of living. Jesus was demonstrating this when he let Judas go without displaying any judgement. He didn’t chastise Judas, send his other followers to stop him, or even say anything against what Judas was going to do. Jesus simply sent him on his way to do what he needed to do. We could consider Judas to be the enemy of Jesus, but Jesus still treated him with respect, and even kindness. Jesus continued to love Judas.

I expect we have all had times in our lives when we have been hurt or betrayed by someone we love. They say it is often those we love the most who hurt us most deeply. My life experience tells me this is true.

So how do we love someone who has hurt us? You have likely seen or heard, or even experienced someone loving their abuser and being unable or unwilling to get out of the situation, believing this is showing sacrificial love. This is not the kind of love Jesus was demonstrating or commanding. If you’re involved in a situation like this, I would encourage you to get professional help. God does not want us to be in situations where we would be repeatedly hurt or abused.

We are however, commanded to love those who don’t think the way we do. People who are different. This is illustrated in the 1st reading today when Peter learned that the gospel message is for Gentiles as well as Jews.

The world is now coming out of its own dark night as we learn to live with the ongoing pandemic. There are those who believe they have the right to live exactly as they did before COVID, and those who are still very nervous and isolated, perhaps for good reason. There are many people somewhere in between these two responses. People who are at the opposite end from our way of thinking can seem like our enemies. Think of recent anti-mask protests, and on the opposite end, people who won’t go out in public without wearing two masks. Both

sides have expressed offence at those who don't believe as they do. The vaccine has been a contentious issue for many, and the government has spent untold dollars to convince us they are safe and effective. Not everyone accepts that though, and it has damaged families and friendships. In some cases, it has caused irreparable damage. It has been difficult to love others at times.

In our rapidly changing world, we will meet people from all kinds of backgrounds and with all kinds of beliefs, even within the church, and within this parish. We could get into arguments with some, believing our way is right. Or we could forcibly push our "right" ways of living and thinking, much as the settlers did when colonizing North America, and as systems and some individuals continue to do today.

Or we could approach people with different ideas with a sense of curiosity and respect, knowing that God loves them, and will help us to love them when we ask for God's help.

This is the new commandment; that we love one another even if we don't see eye to eye. Even if it feels like the other person is our enemy. The world will know we are Christians by our love.

May God be glorified by our love for each other. Amen.