

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson
The Feast Day of Absalom Jones
February 12, 2017

"Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to him belong, they are weak but he is strong." I must have sung this catchy little tune hundreds of times in my life, as a young child sitting in a circle in my Sunday school class and then as a Sunday school teacher for 15 years, using the song to gather the class into our sharing time. It's a classic. It's uplifting, comforting, and has some pretty solid theology. Jesus loves us. That is true, and that's part of the message we hear in our gospel story today.

However, whereas this song contains solid theology, it does not contain complete theology. If we think religion or Jesus or God is solely about our receiving the love of Jesus for our sake or for our pleasure, then we need to get out of our Sunday School classroom mentality and, as adults, embrace the other half of Jesus' message this morning.

Jesus' command today is to love one another as Jesus has loved us. A helpful metaphor for the gospel this morning is a chain of love. Like everything, it begins with God.

God gives God's complete love and revelation to Jesus.

Jesus, in turn, gives God's complete love and revelation to his disciples.

His disciples are then, in turn, to give God's complete love and revelation to each other.

This is how the chain works: each link receiving love and then paying it forward.

John is really clear about to whom we are to be paying God's love forward. In the synoptic gospels, those of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, i.e. the ones we can see through the same lens, the gospel writers command us to love the foreigner, the immigrant, the ones we perceive as our enemies, the stranger, those who we perceive as distant from us, whether they live across the world or in the house next door. These gospel writers instruct us to erase the boundaries we have created and to draw these people near. We know this through the stories of the Good Samaritan and through Matthew's great commission.

John, however, offers us a different challenge. We are to love the ones right in front of us. The ones in the pew beside, behind, or in front of us, the ones we sit next to in the classroom, the ones we share a meal with, the ones we march with, the ones we disagree with, the ones we believe we cannot understand, the ones our hearts have gotten all out of shape about. These are the ones we are to love, as Jesus has loved us, in the fullness of the truth of God's love and revelation.

My sense is that John is saying you will only understand my love when you figure out how to give it away. "This, my friends," I can imagine Jesus saying, "is eternal life, the endless receiving and giving of love."

In Jesus' command this morning, "love one another as I have loved you", we should hear the invitation and the challenge. To accept and live into this commandment often requires a "coming of age" moment.

We can no longer think Jesus is all about this fluffy emotion of love, but rather hear and see within the commandment a taking upon ourselves of an obligation to share this love of Jesus with all people. The obligation is one of heart and therefore we cannot pick and choose to whom to give Jesus' love. It is a state of being that must permeate our very being. This commandment can be seen as an invitation to move from anxious separate living, where we have placed boundaries all around us, into a state of holy communion, where there are no lines to separate us from the love of Jesus and our love of our neighbor. So, it's a good place to be, but it can be a hard road to walk to get there, because it implies we must live justly.

Captured within Jesus' commandment "love others as I have loved you" is an inherent stripping away of any power differential we may have between ourselves and others. Jesus says to his disciples, as a way to provoke their understanding of the commandment, "I no longer call you servant, for a servant does not know what the master is doing, but I have called you friend, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my father. Master to slave is a one-way relationship and has a different power differential than friend to friend, which is a two-way relationship and offers an equality and mutuality of relationship.

There is probably no better example of this played out in our liturgy than the foot-washing on Maundy Thursday. Mostly we all feel uncomfortable when we get to this part of the service. I imagine there are those of us who don't come that evening, just to avoid this experience of "loving each other as Jesus loves us". It can be uncomfortable whether we are washing each other's feet or our own feet are being washed, because justice, this two-way relationship of love with all people, doesn't fit us yet. We have not yet grown fully into the stature of Christ. Only then will our chain of God's love be strong. But that's the dream. That's what we signed onto in our baptism and in our confirmation, our acknowledging that this deep truth of justice and love for each other is our calling and is a part of our heritage, as sons and daughters of God.

This means the other person's troubles, whether they are in a distant place of the world or in your neighborhood, become yours. The other person's pain, one you recognize or one which is completely foreign to you, becomes yours to hold and sit with and ease. The other person's hunger for justice and truth and righteousness or food on the table, becomes yours to address. This is not a "when I choose to" but an always commandment given by Jesus to his disciples, shortly before his death.

There's danger in loving so much, receiving and giving of Jesus' love, as we heard Wednesday evening during our conversation on the Ridiculous Journey of Following Jesus. Nadia Boltz Weber, a Lutheran pastor, comments on the danger of having a personal relationship with Jesus: "Getting closer feels dangerous. I'm going to end up loving someone I don't like again. Giving away more of my money? I don't know. It just feels like a bad idea." But this is what being a Christian means. This is what we take into our being when we are baptized, confirmed,

and each time we receive the body and blood of Christ. We are committing ourselves to love one another as Jesus loves us. Each time we believe and hang onto the truth that Jesus loves us, we must also hear within that affirmation a challenge, to love one other, for this is Jesus' great commandment in the gospel of John.

Today is the feast day of Absalom Jones, the first African-American Episcopal Priest. He was born into slavery in 1746, and after being separated from his mother and siblings, was sold and moved to Philadelphia where he became a merchant and learned to read, with his primer being the New Testament. He ended up forming St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Philadelphia because, when he was worshiping in St. George's Methodist Church, he was such a good evangelist, he was so filled with the love of Jesus in his heart, he was commanded and called to give it away, to share it with the people who needed it the most, the helpless and hopeless; people who were oppressed and imprisoned and who wanted to be set free; people starving to be empowered by the Holy Spirit to wish for a better life, and he filled the church, which used to be an all-white church, with blacks allowed to be on the balcony on Sunday mornings. Suddenly St. George's became a church where the perceived power differential, the percentage of white and black members was shifting, and Absalom and his people were ushered away from the balcony to the street. He began the Free African Society which later gave birth to St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, where Mother Betsy returned to church. An important piece here is that he stayed in relationship with those who had shunned him, for deep inside he knew that, as he had received the love of Jesus, he had to give it away, to those with whom he had shared worship, if not in the same pew but in the same building, to those who appeared to be his enemies, to those who saw this commandment to read "love those who are like them", to those who held foreign ideas to the ones he held about the love of Jesus. Absalom Jones broke the bonds of slavery of hatred and injustice by living into Jesus' commandment of "loving one another as I love you."

The eighth Station of the Cross in Jerusalem is marked only by a slice of a pillar embedded in the street wall and inscribed with the Greek letters, NIKA, for Jesus Christ the Conqueror. It's a station marking where Jesus spoke to the women who were weeping, for they realized Jesus had not received a pardon at the city gate and was on his way to death. Weeping was common then, as now, for people were always heading off to war, or execution, or detention centers. But Jesus says to them, "Don't weep for me. Weep for yourself instead." And Jesus tells us not to weep for him, but to weep for ourselves, for the suffering we will endure due to our injustices and our cruelty.

Here's the prayer we prayed at that station:

Let us pray:

In penitence and sorrow for each time right is obscured by might; for every time the powerful are given undue respect while the weak are powerless, the poor and dispossessed are ignored or repressed; We pray for liberation for women and for liberation for men;

Lord have mercy.
Christ have mercy.
Lord have mercy.

For ourselves; That the Holy Spirit will give us the mind of Christ to love and respect those who are oppressed; and to know Christ's dignity when we are made to suffer indignity.

Lord have mercy.
Christ have mercy.
Lord have mercy.

To love one another is our greatest need and it is what the world is dying for. Amen.