

Sermon for 5 Easter C
Church of the Good Shepherd, Wareham
May 2, 2010

Jesus said, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

That's so nice, isn't it? Love one another. What could be easier? Jesus doesn't even say, "Love everybody in Jerusalem or Israel or the world," he just says to the disciples, "Love one another." Just those of you who are already followers, disciples. Note that this commandment comes at the Last Supper: one of the disciples has gone out to find the temple police and bring them to arrest Jesus, another disciple will deny Jesus, the rest will scatter. And Jesus says, "Love one another."

Love one another—the disciple who betrayed, the disciple who denied, the disciples who ran away, the disciples who stayed and watched, the disciples who doubted. How easy it would have been for them to blame and shame—"It was all Judas' fault!" "Well, I may have run away and hidden, but at least I didn't pretend I didn't know the Lord like Peter!" "Brothers, why did you scoff at us when we told you that Jesus was alive?" "And then there's Thomas, 'Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and spear marks in his side, I won't believe!'" "Love one another." Not so simple after all. You only have to read the book of Acts and the letters of Paul to the early churches to know that from Day 1 there were disagreements, arguments, and struggles among disciples and church members. Who is in charge? Who will feed the orphans and widows? What do you do when leaders or members take sides or get drunk or sleep around? Do non-Jewish Christians have to become Jews first?

Love one another. Jesus says that to the disciples, the inner circle of followers. But it is soon apparent that he means to include others in the circle of those to be loved. The Acts of the Apostles follows the disciples as they take the Gospel out into the world and the circle of believers becomes ever larger. Time and again the disciples are faced with the question—Am I to love this person too? The answer always comes back, "Yes." But it's hard, even painful, work! It goes against the grain.

Peter is a good Jew. He observes the dietary and cleanliness laws of Judaism. So when he has a vision of a sheet filled with all kinds of animals, predators, reptiles, and birds, and a voice says, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat,' Peter is repulsed. These are all animals he's been taught are unclean. Jews would never eat them. Can you imagine being told to eat cockroaches? Just no way! And Peter says, "Absolutely not! I've never eaten anything profane or unclean, and I'm not about to start now." The voice says, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane or dirty.' This whole scene happens two more times. (My daughter pointed out to me that Peter always gets things in threes, doesn't he?)

The scene is not just about what food is acceptable, it's about loving others. At the moment the vision ended, men came for Peter to bring him to the Roman centurion Cornelius. If Jews don't eat "unclean" food, they certainly don't go into the "unclean" houses of Gentile Romans, especially those of the hated military personnel. But that is exactly what the vision was about, preparing Peter, so that he could love a new disciple. When Peter spoke to Cornelius and his household, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they were baptized and became followers of Christ. This was God's doing, because before this, Peter would have not have been able to get his head around the idea of hanging out with Gentiles. It just was not done. He had spent his whole life being indoctrinated about how unclean and unworthy Gentiles were. So there was a huge wall between Peter and Gentiles.

God tears down the wall, by showing Peter that he is not better than the Gentiles. “What God has made clean, you must not call dirty.” That’s how it works. God is always trying to expand our notion of who is lovable, who is acceptable. And to do that, God has to show us that we are not better than the ones we are called to love. The original disciples were called to love one another, because Jesus knew that they were all at fault—betraying, denying, doubting, running away—but all completely loved and forgiven. We are able to love, when we are able to see ourselves as not better, but equally as loved, as the other.

Today we are going host the 1st Annual Wareham Walk for Hunger. It’s a great thing for this church to be doing, as it makes hunger and homelessness more visible in the community, and lifts up the resources that are here to help. It’s particularly important now, when more people than ever are facing food insecurity and hunger. It’s easy when you’re comfortable to feel separate from and different from “those people”—poor and hungry people. But I had a humbling experience last year. I lost both of my part-time jobs within a month of each other. My kids were on Mass Health, and we had about enough savings for one more month of expenses. I called to find out about getting food stamps. In a somewhat surreal exchange, I listened to the food stamp counselor pour out her heart for about 15 minutes about how hard it was to do her job while so many people were so needy before I could get a word in edgewise to ask about signing up for help. As it turned out, a received a check in the mail that day from a friend and soon afterward got a job, but through those months of unemployment, I saw the wall go down between me and people living on the edge. Love one another. It doesn’t take much to go from financially stable to living hand-to-mouth. Pray that the Walk goes well.

Remember how I said that God always pushes us to love outside of our comfort zone? In my own lifetime I have seen society and church wrestle with this question. Can we completely love and accept women, African Americans, Hispanic/Latinos, Muslims, new immigrants, illegal immigrants, gays and lesbians, transgender people, those who are politically or religiously liberal or conservative? The wrestling and questioning goes on, even though great strides have been made. I believe that the next great frontier of love is here.

This is a jar full of decaying matter—food scraps, leaves, dirt, bacteria, fungi, maybe some worms or maggots or bugs. I’m trying to start a compost pile. Here, do you want a whiff? Ewww . . . We have been indoctrinated to think of this as disgusting. Germs. Bacteria. Decay. Spiders. Flies. Bugs. Worms. Vermin—rats, mice, cockroaches, beetles, ants, termites. You have negative reactions to these words. They cause disease, destruction, death. Much of our economy is based on trying to eradicate these “bad things.” We have poisons and pills and cleansers and cleaners and drugs—but slowly we are coming to the realization that the “solution” is worse than the problem. The toxic chemicals we use to kill off rats and bacteria and cockroaches are—guess what?—toxic to us too. Did you know that the alcohol used in hand sanitizers destroys cell membranes and the triclosan used in other hand sanitizers causes cancer? The DDT used to eradicate mosquitoes on Cape Cod in the 50’s is associated with high breast cancer incidence in the area.

We are not better than rodents, spiders, and bacteria. We are part of God’s Creation, just like all the critters, and we are called to love all that God made. We are completely forgiven and loved. But if we keep trying to wipe out the Created animals and plants, we will not only grieve God, we will destroy ourselves in the process. What God has made, and made good, we are not to call dirty or bad.

The next frontier of loving is here. We are called to love one another in the church, in Wareham and beyond, to love the poor and hunger, people of other backgrounds, behaviors, and beliefs, and we are also called to love all God’s Creation. What a huge assignment! Yet, God is the one who can make this happen—to tear down the walls and open our hearts to the Other. Let us pray. AMEN.