

5 Easter C - 2 May 2010
Acts 11:1-18; Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35
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It is not a suggestion or an invitation. It is a commandment. 'Love one another,' says Jesus. Jesus, I think, has confidence in his disciples on this day that he first utters these words. With Jesus here among them, they likely love one another very much in the way that Jesus intends them to do it. As he likely reminds them of it in the days and weeks following his resurrection, the disciples likely love one another very much as Jesus has loved them.

But Jesus knows that after he is gone, people will want to join them, people who are more different from the disciples than they are similar to them. And then it will be questions for them, will they love naturally, as they do now; or will they need the strength of this command to remind them? It is around this question in particular that the entire rest of the Church is confronting Peter.

'What do you think you're doing,' they ask him, 'having Christian fellowship with people who are not observant Jews?' It may seem surprising to people today, but the early Church was, in respect to outsiders, much like many other communities. As far as these folks of the early Church are concerned, people cannot belong to the community of the Church without first being part of an observant Jewish family. The early Church is eager at first to experience people coming into its fellowship. Popularity implies a certain validation of the community's beliefs. Everyone likes to be told that their ideas are right.

But note also that it is not the Church that adds to their number. As the end of the second chapter of Acts reads, it is 'the Lord [who] adds daily to the number of those being saved.' As the community of followers of Christ grows, it seems that growth given by God is the only kind that can actually happen. And so, it seems to be growth that needs to be guided by the weightiness of divine command.

I read about a congregation of a Christian tradition that gives aspiring members a verbal test that they must pass in order to be accepted for membership. This case finds a man seeking membership who is notably poorer than, notably less educated than, and whose complexion notably distinguishes him from, the entire rest of the

congregation. With the man seated before the examining board, he answers their questions from a deep familiarity with scripture and a healthy experience of the Love of God.

Finally one of the examiners asks the fellow a question that he is sure will confound the man and encourage to him realize that his place is elsewhere. "Final question," the examiner declares. "If you can answer this one, then you are in. "And if you cannot, then we will not admit you for membership." The man nods. "The final test is:" the examiner announces, "Describe the meaning of the Book of Revelation?" The examiners lean back assuredly, anticipating the man's surrender of his bothersome desire for membership.

And though this question is one worth pondering ourselves, yet today, it would be a distraction from the more pressing question of how we followers of Christ are to respond to the command to love one another as Christ loves us.

As the dispute demonstrates between early Christians who are keeping the Hebrew Law and the Gentile Christians who do not, this impulse does not come naturally to people to 'love one another.' Whether by nature or by nurture, the inclination of most people seems more to respond with caution toward the stranger who is trying to come into their midst.

How do you and I love one another, and how do we love the stranger coming in among us, in the same way that Jesus loves us? This is a big question for Christians today. (Do I hear a preference that we should return to pondering the mysteries of the Revelation instead?) How do you and I possibly manage to love one another and to love others around us as Christ first loves us?

And I think the first hint of our way forward is found in the simple fact that it is a commandment of Jesus that we find a way to do it. The notion of loving one another and those around us is not one wonderful ideal among the many that we discover or infer from Jesus' ministry and example. In plain direct language, Jesus calls you and me to make this a priority. There can be

very little, then, if anything, that you or I can allow to come between us and the fulfilling of this commandment.

And this is not because we want to cull favor with God, as though going through the motions of loving one another will somehow fool God into blessing us.

I think we really have to wonder sometimes about the underestimation of God inherent in theologies that seek to teach us to obey God in order to purchase God's blessing or to avoid God's wrath. Hopefully, it is enough for us to recognize that this is important to God; and so we become invested in discovering what of God we might find in making it important also to us.

I think it fair and accurate to note that here at ECR, welcome and hospitality are spiritual gifts that we exercise well. They don't just come to us automatically, though. Rather, these are spiritual gifts; i.e. they are given to us from God. God entrusts these to this community for us either to use them to our blessing or to lose them through atrophy. Loving one another and others around us as Christ loves us involves just such gifts as ours, the gifts of welcome and warm hospitality. At the same time, such love as that with which Christ loves us means moving beyond even so wonderful such gifts as these.

Jesus loves his disciples beyond being merely hospitable toward them as toward strangers, visitors, and guests. Jesus loves his followers as his friends, his neighbors; as his brothers and sisters; Jesus loves the disciples as his family. This means loving the quirky disciple as one might live the quirky aunt or uncle. It means loving the stranger as one loves the cousin that one has never met but whom we have always known was out there, and now at last are blessed to meet. All these while loving also the mother, the father, the brother, the sister, with whom we have a great deal in common. All are family.

And it is so not because we have willed it, but because God commands it, and because Christ has already made it so. The church's examining board is testing the fellow who wants to be admitted as a member. Question after question, his answers are surprisingly sound and good. Now, they are asking him a final question, one designed to keep him out; for in too many ways he is too 'other' for their tastes, and they really want him to fail.

"The final question, then," says the examiner, "is, 'what is the meaning of the biblical book of Revelation?'" The man is startled by the question. His brow is knit in thought and worry. He ponders the question long and hard. "Well sir," he says at last, "I think the Book of Revelation means that God wins." The examining board sits with mouths dropped open. "By golly!" shouts the lead examiner, "You are right, sir! There really is no better answer," he goes on. "'God wins!' And now so do we!" Rising and crossing the room, the examiner holds out his hand. "Welcome to your membership among us! We are blessed to have you. Now, please stay, if you will. We have some other matters to address today. And I realize now that you belong here, where we can work and pray together."

Today, tomorrow, this week, this year, you and I will recognize ourselves in the stranger, visitor, or guest, and we will find it a blessedly easy to welcome him, her, them, into their life and ministry here with us. But when the stranger is more different than similar, when the newcomer is older, younger, more able, less able, is she instead of he, is married instead of single, is widowed instead of married, is gay instead of straight or straight instead of gay, is white instead of brown, is black instead of yellow or red, - then today, this week, this month, this year, that's when you and I will do well to be more intentional than usual about loving this person into our lives, loving him, her, them from guest to newcomer, from newcomer to fellow disciple with us here in the life of the community that we have made our own.

This is when we find God not only adding them to our number, but adding us to theirs. This is when looking upon the varied faces of this community, listening to the range of voices, we find here our own vision come down from heaven, our own word come down from God. This is when we find here the depths of our own belonging. This is when we find ourselves set free by our surrender to the command of God to love.

And so may Almighty God, who holds our souls in life and in eternity, grant us grace to honor God with all our being, and to do in truth and beauty all that God has given us to do; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, One God, now and for ever. Amen.