

Year B 6th Sunday in Easter John 15 9 to 17 “Love is the Endgame”

If you’ve ever listened to an entire symphony, you’ll notice that each of the different parts is different but still has some of the same melodies to connect the separate pieces into one great whole. This is what John does for us with Jesus’ message. He repeats pieces to connect the message into one whole. God does this too. God doesn't tell us something once and hope we'll "get it". God repeats his message over and over again – in various words and stories and images – so that it registers in our brains, takes hold of our imaginations, sinks into our bones. So today Jesus continues teaching us about being in relationship with God through being in relationship with him and how that impacts our lives.

This Gospel today is just 9 verses...but, in those nine verses, we hear the word "love" nine times. We hear the word "command" or “commandments" five times. Just like last week, this repetition is driving home something important. This repetition is, in fact, Jesus’ way of taking us ever deeper into the meaning of his command to love.

Jesus spends a lot of time reassuring his disciples of his love for them – a love that will remain with them through the presence of the Holy Spirit – and he does this because they know he is about to be killed and be physically taken from them and the world is not going to treat them, his followers, very kindly. They really need this reassurance and so do we. We’re in the same boat – Jesus has been physically taken from us and the world does not treat us very kindly. We, fortunately, are not persecuted here in Sault Ste Marie but we are, oftentimes, treated as irrelevant, unimportant, perhaps called “bible thumpers” if we try to talk about God. We need Jesus’ explanation of his command to love and the assurance of his love so let's dive in and see what we can discover.

All this talk about commandments makes it sound like there are a whole lot of rules we must follow. But it turns out, there is just one commandment issued – one big one. Love. The description we hear sounds like a chain reaction: God loves. Jesus lives in that love and so Jesus loves us. Then Jesus assures us of his love and that we are to live in that love. If we do, we will love others just like Jesus loves. God loves...Jesus loves...we love...all of us, together, joined through bonds of love.

Remembering last week's gospel, we are the multitude of tangled up branches, branches of Jesus the vine joining us to the love and care of God, the vine grower.

So, why all the talk about commands? Why command us to love? You'd think we would want to love God and love everyone – it sounds wonderful. Why do we need to be commanded over and over again to love?

Well, it might be wise for us to first take a closer look at the word "commandment". Needing to translate the Bible into English out of the original Greek means, quite often, something gets lost in translation...we lose some of the richness of the original text. The word "commandment" in Greek, *entole* (entolay) actually comes from two other Greek words. The first is "en" meaning "in." The second is "telos" which means "the end" or "consummation." "*En telos*". The two words put together are then, simply, "in the end" and it means a focus on the end result – the reason for – a command. Jesus' command for us to love God and to love our neighbour are the goals for the end. God has, and has always had, one goal, one purpose. God desires that everything and everyone be in perfect relationship with him and with each other. In other words, that all things love...nothing but love...dwelling in God's love. That's the end game.

Jesus is referred to as the Alpha and the Omega – the beginning and the end. He is God's perfect love and showed the world nothing but love as he hung on the cross. In Jesus' perfect love, all things are being reconciled to God. Paul writes, "For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in Jesus, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross" (Col.1:19-20). Jesus has made it possible for the world to accomplish God's purpose, the endgame of love.

Of course, that still begs the question, why do we need to be reminded again and again that God's purpose is love and we must love? Well, if we humans want to get good at something, it requires repetition. And, truthfully, we're not consistently very good at this "love" thing.

Jesus makes it clear he is talking about a radical love...not our love for chocolate or apple pie, or even our love for our friends and families. He's talking about a radical

love – the ultimate love – a love borne inside that would lead us to give up our lives. It may be easy to picture giving up your life for your kids or your grandkids or a close friend. The love of God that Jesus bears for us – and the love he tells us to bear for everything and everyone else – goes even beyond this. He has shown us, and the disciples, this kind of love already when he got down on his knees and washed their feet. This wasn't just radical love because he was the master washing the students' feet. This was radical love because of who *they* were and washing their feet drives home the point that God's love is action not warm, fuzzy feelings. Jesus washed the feet of *all* his disciples – the feet of Judas whose betrayal was going to get him nailed to the cross; the feet of Peter – his supposedly loyal friend who was going to deny that he even knew Jesus. He washed their feet too. This love is extremely difficult for us. We humans constantly allow the lack of warm fuzzies to stop us from loving others. We feel hurt and we walk away. We take offense and we withdraw. We look at appearances and behaviours and we decide we are not going to get close.

We are ordinary people being asked to do an extraordinary thing. Jesus commands us to go beyond these sorts of reactions, to embrace God's love instead. Why? Jesus gives us three reasons.

We will have joy, he tells us, *complete* joy. When we love as God loves, we have the deep, abiding joy that carries us through the dark spots, the tough bits, the brokenness that we will all, at least sometimes, experience. God's love gives joy.

When we love as God loves we will be called "friends" – not servants, with lower status, who do things because they are told to do things – but friends, *friends* who are in the inner circle, friends who are a part of God's life, doing things because they *want* to.

When we love as God loves, as friends, we will want to love all else...which means we will bear fruit. We are asked to love as God loves so that we will transform the world. As friends, we carry God and God's kingdom within us into the world – that power working in us that can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine – changing the world until there is nothing but love, God's kingdom on earth as in heaven. John Dominic Crossan calls this transformation of the world the "great divine clean-up". And he so rightly points out that Jesus is saying to us today, this clean-up cannot

happen without God but neither can it happen without us. Jesus chose us, we hear today, and all that we ask God to do for us to further the endgame of love, God will do.

When we love as God loves, this allows us to love the world, to see the world through God's eyes, realizing that it is worth dying for. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, teaching young pastors at an illegal seminary in Germany as Hitler rose to power, said to his young students, "When Jesus calls us, he calls us to die." Today's gospel makes clear that we must love so completely – as Jesus did – that *that* option is actually on the table as it was for Deitrich Bonhoeffer, for Oscar Romero, for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Most of us, though, will perhaps relate more to preacher Fred Craddock's realization of what laying down his life meant. Fred admits that, when he was called to be a follower of Jesus, he thought giving his life meant writing one big cheque – going down in a giant blaze of heroic, selfless glory. What he discovered, though, is that giving his life for others in the name of Jesus is – as he puts it – the continuous writing of small cheques – a dollar here, a dollar there. We fight to end world hunger starting with our donations to local foodbanks. We fight against world poverty by providing local housing, by giving Christmas gifts to impoverished families next door, by giving to the church so that our resources can do God's work in bigger ways than we could on our own. Jesus calls us to write our little cheques, to take up our cross in other words – because the cross is Jesus' battle against oppression, injustice, inequality, love of power...his battle against all that is wrong in this world. His cross is now our cross – ordinary people asked to do extraordinary things because love is the endgame.

"This is my commandment, my purpose," Jesus says, "that you love one another as I have loved you."

"Well, how much do you love us?" we ask him. "This much," Jesus answered as he stretched out his arms and died.