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Trinity Episcopal Church

Acts 11: 1 – 18

Psalm 148

Revelation 21: 1 – 6

John 13: 31 – 35

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Here it is, the fifth Sunday of Easter, colored eggs and chocolate bunnies and the Easter ham all long ago consumed, Easter lilies flowerless and possibly deceased by now, egg plates and door decorations long since put away. Life back to normal, or so it would seem. But not really. Because *we* are changed. And the *world* is changed. To borrow from an old Johnson and Johnson commercial, resurrection changes everything. It changes what we think we know about how the world works. It changes what we think we know about how God works. And yes, it changes what we think we know about how our relationships with each other work. Why? Because it turns out that resurrection is all about love.

We tend to talk about love in funny ways. We “fall in love” as if love were some sort of hole in the ground. We say we love chocolate cake almost in the same breath, in the same intonation, as we say that we love someone dear to us. The rock band, Queen, sang about a “crazy little thing called love,” and there are countless other songs, books and movies about this amorphous thing we call love. “Love” is a word that has so very many connotations and not a little baggage. So when Jesus says, “they will know that you are my followers if you have love for one another,” just exactly what are we to make of that word “love?” Perhaps Eliza Doolittle, from *My Fair Lady*, gets at the heart of it when she cries out, “Words, words, words! I’m so tired of words! Don’t talk to me of love, don’t talk to me of June, don’t talk to me of anything at all, *just show me!*” I kind of think that’s what Jesus is saying to us, his disciples.

There is a story from Mother Theresa’s early days in Calcutta. One day, Mother Theresa received a beggar into her home. The woman asked her to help a nearby Hindu family who had not eaten in several days. Mother Theresa immediately grabbed a bag of rice and set off towards where the family lived. When she arrived, Mother Theresa could see a tell-tale sign of an extended period of malnutrition in the haunting, bright, glassy eyes of the children. It was a sight that was to stay with Mother Theresa for the rest of her life.

Mother Theresa handed over the coveted bag of rice to the mother of the Hindu family. Then, without any hesitation, the mother walked right out the door. Puzzled, Mother Theresa waited until the woman returned. “Where did you go? What were you doing?” she asked the mother. The woman replied simply, “They needed food, too.” “Who are ‘they’?” Mother Theresa asked. “A Muslim family a couple of doors away,” the woman responded. Another family of hollow-cheeked, distended-bellied, glassy-eyed children. From Christian to Hindu to Muslim. In a matter of a few minutes, the Gospel of love was proclaimed.

“By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples,” Jesus says, “if you have love for one another.” That’s the bottom line. If you have love for one another. Jesus-love. Servant love. The disciples, who have just witnessed and participated in the washing of their feet by Jesus, and who have

had front row seats to this kind of love the entire time they've been following Jesus, are told in some of Jesus' last words to them, that *that* kind of love will be the hallmark of their mission in the world.

Love. Love for one another, which is often a lot harder than loving our enemies with whom we might not come in contact much. Love within the community which will come to bear the Christ's name. It doesn't really matter, Jesus says, how well you're organized or how effective your evangelism program is, it's how well you live into servant love. It's not about how eloquently you preach or what a beautiful house of worship you have, Jesus says. It's about loving one another so much that there are really no limits on that love. It's not about getting the theology all worked out, or correctly predicting the day when the Kingdom of God will break through in all its glory. It's about the willingness to give away one's life for the sake of another. It's about the kind of love that will carry Jesus to the cross and beyond.

Last week, we talked about how Jesus and God are in unity in will and in work. So the sacrificial love of God is revealed most especially in Jesus and the cross. Jesus uses the words "glorify" and "glorification" five times in the first two verses of today's short Gospel passage from John. And although in our common parlance we use "glory" in phrases like "no guts, no glory" and "someone is in their glory," meaning honor or recognition or basking in the moment, that isn't what it really means in a Biblical sense. In the Bible, to glorify means to reveal the true essence of something or someone. So, we could hear Jesus' words more like, "Now the true essence of the Son of Man has been revealed, and the true essence of God has been revealed in him." The true essence of God, sacrificial love, is revealed in the words and works of Jesus. Jesus' willingness to give away his life to show the magnitude of God's love is the zenith of sacrificial love, servant love, Jesus-love.

It is this model of love which transforms the frightened bunch of followers into the Way, that movement that will begin to transform the world. It is the love that these disciples exhibit which will renew the world. In his first letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul writes that there is "faith, hope and love," and that the greatest of these is love. It is the greatest of the spiritual gifts he notes, because without that, nothing else matters; we are simply noisy gongs or clanging cymbals.

In the Hellenistic world which preceded Jesus and his disciples, Homer used the Greek word *αγαπω* as the verb 'to love.' Only in later Greek did it become a noun, *αγαπε*, and even then, it was used only infrequently and judiciously. By the time that the early Christians begin to use the word, it has come to mean a 'generous act for the sake of another,' or the kind of love parents might have for an only child. The early Christians eagerly take on the word to describe their experience of Jesus-love, the essence of their life together in Christian community.

In Paul's writings, *αγαπε* is used most often as love without a direct object. An unmotivated, objectless love, a sort of essence or fragrance or ethos in which the Christian community is nurtured and grounded. It is also used to name that motivating force which guides the actions of Christians. It is the way by which Christians share in that divine union between Jesus and God.

C. S. Lewis famously differentiated between what he called the Four Loves from the Greek: 1) storge or family love; 2) philia or friendship love; 3) eros or romantic love; and 4) agape or divine love. Several decades later, Frederick Buechner wrote that “the first stage is to believe that there is only one kind of love. The middle stage is that there are many kinds of love and that the Greeks had a different word for each of them. The last stage is to believe that there is only one kind of love.” Love is patient and kind, Paul says, it is not envious or boastful or arrogant. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

The Rev. Julie Pennington-Russell recounts a story about her friend Roger. Roger is/was a pastor in Austin Texas. Years before, Roger decided he wanted to learn how to whittle, so he went to visit a man named Joe McMordie who was an accomplished wood carver. Roger was a pretty pathetic student of this by his own description, and yet he remembered one valuable piece of wisdom from Joe. One day, as they were each carving, or trying to carve, a little dog, Roger, completely frustrated, turned to Joe and asked, “How do you do this? What’s the secret of carving?” Joe looked up at him thoughtfully for a moment and replied, “That’s easy. You pick up a piece of wood and just cut off everything that doesn’t look like dog.”

So regarding love, we begin with what doesn’t look like love. If we take Christianity and somehow distill it down to its essence, boil away all those things that don’t look like love and eliminate all the peripheral concerns, there is one thing that remains: love. What’s left is not a building or a bunch of doctrines or creeds or rules. When all else is vaporized, what remains is the face of love. As Pennington-Russell writes, the face of absolute, unambiguous, undiluted love, the face of Jesus.

Love is all you need, the Beatles sang. And Jesus would probably agree. Jesus shows us, in his words and his works, that love is key. And he shows us one more thing about love that is essential: love is always something we do. We come full circle grammatically. Love is an action verb. Love is always something we do. No matter what. Even when everything else in our world tells us to lash out in fear, or hatred, or anger, our response is to be that of reaching out with love, our arms wide open. Jesus never tells us that it will be easy. But that is what in every case distinguishes love from sentimentality, or warm fuzzies, or good intentions or simply loving those who are easy to love. Love, in the end, is always something we do. In the end, Love wins.

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