

Easter 6B – 05/05/2024

Even after the cutting and pruning we talked about last week, Jesus still comes back to love. The cutting and pruning is about letting Jesus clean up our lives in order that we can be more intimate, have a stronger connection with him. In today's lesson, Jesus uses the example of the love that he has with God. From the Inclusive Bible we hear "As my Abba has loved me,. So have I loved you. Live on in my love."

What kind of love is this? It is of course the agape or sacrificial love that Jesus demonstrated his entire life on earth. God loves Jesus sacrificially, Jesus loves us sacrificially and now Jesus says continue on in this sacrificial love. So Jesus says continue to do what I have commanded you to do, just as I have kept God's commands to love another as I have loved you.

In reality, I don't know if I want to love the same people that Jesus loves. Can you relate to this? People and that includes you and me, can put others down, and this is when we are living out all the isms that we can think of. In reality not one of is the same. At Faith we believe that God created all people equal, and everyone is worthy of God's love. Our welcoming statement says this.

We, at Faith Lutheran Church, welcome you as a child of God. As Paul said in his letter to the Galatians, "for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith." (Galatians 3:26) We strive to be a place where everyone is welcomed and affirmed.

No matter your age, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, marital status, faith background, political leanings, or mental or physical ability – you are welcome as you are. As children of God, we are all one in Christ Jesus and rely on the unconditional nature of God's love and grace to be our help and guide.

But what if someone doesn't think and feel the way that we do? This is where I have to step back and realize that everyone is on a different journey. As much as I may have a problem with loving them, Jesus still does. This is where the cutting and pruning comes into play. As a human being and as a gay man I know that there are people who believe that I am going to hell and don't believe that I should have the same rights as heterosexual people.

Jesus still commands me to love them. But why should I have to love them, could I just let Jesus love them? Unfortunately, that is not what Jesus is

commanding me to do. As he is not physically here, he is asking me to continue in his love. But is Jesus really asking me to open myself up to hate, ridicule and discrimination?

No, I don't believe so. I do believe that he is commanding me to find a way to love the person. For me, that is about showing respect. It is a slippery slope to love in this way, but there may be a way of showing respect and setting boundary lines for ourselves.

One of the first things that shows respect is to listen. We need to understand where a person is coming from before we can respond. It may be important to repeat back what a person has told us, not only to make sure that we understand but that they hear the words that they have spoken.

Use I statements when responding. The point is not to criticize or put them down, but to share where we are at and above all our experience. These may be all ways that you already use to connect with people. I remind you of this as we often encounter people who do the opposite and our command is to show a different way of connecting with people.

This is not easy, and we may be exhausted after one encounter. I do not believe Jesus wants us to get hurt. It is important to remember that we may not receive love back, but that Jesus loves us no matter what the other person may say or do. If you receive some love and respect back, the connection may be able to continue.

It is important to remember that Jesus loves us and we are commanded to love one another, regardless. We are not promised love in return from others. It is when we abide, reside, dwell in Jesus' sacrificial love that we can even begin to love one another.

When we abide in his love, Jesus says that we will experience joy. Having a difficult conversation may not always end in joyfulness. The Greek word for joy is charis, which is also the same root Greek word for grace. God's grace can never be taken away from us, it is always there. God's grace is something to always receive.

It is God's grace that calls us to connect with all people. We have been chosen to love one another to connect with others and that means outside of this beloved community. It may only be out of love and respect for another that does not see life the way we do, that allows us to share our story as long as we listen to them.

We have been studying the New Testament in confirmation. The Jesus community that the early church leaders were trying to grow were running into many of the same issues that we still have today. The hierarchical system in the

Roman government put white rich males at the top, other white men underneath and women and children at the bottom. Jesus' community says all are equal and important and all had gifts to support the community.

We continue to see this Roman hierarchal type system today and leaders who promote it. Paul was also trying to teach that all people were welcome Jews and Gentiles alike as stated in our welcoming statement. There were no prerequisites other than responding to God's love and forgiveness.

Empires were built by conquering enemies and enslaving them. They then imposed high taxes to control people. Their allegiance was above all to one man, Ceaser. Do we not still see this in our world today? There are countries that are doing this right now. This structure looks tempting to other leaders also.

Jesus' community is commanded to build the community by loving and sharing the good news that has been experienced through Jesus' death and resurrection. I am not suggesting that we go and tell people in other religions that this is the only way to God. It doesn't mean though, that we can't share our story as a Christian and be willing to hear and accept their story in how they relate to God. We actually have the opportunity to learn something from them they may strengthen our relationship with God in Jesus Christ.

I ran across a quote in my sermon folder for this Sunday's texts by Peder Eider. "God abides and makes in us a life of love that's dangerous." He passed away on April 26 and was 56 years old. Peder was a Christian worship artist, a singer-songwriter for 25+ years, recording 18 full albums, and touring internationally. Peder also worked for many years in youth ministry. He has performed at many Lutheran churches and camps.

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To live out Jesus' command to love one another as he has loved us, is in a sense dangerous. It is very counter cultural. Thankfully we are not called to this alone, we have Jesus residing in us, we have the Holy Spirit guiding and encouraging us as well as each other within the Jesus' community. May we remind each other:

"¹²This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command you." John 15:12-14 NRSV