



SAINT ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Sermon for Sunday, May 6, 2018

The Sixth Sunday of Easter

FR. CHARLES WITKE

Acts 10:44-48 | Psalm 98 | 1 John 5:1-6 | John 15:9-17

The letter of St John this morning assures us that whatever is borne of God, such as our faith, conquers the world. He wrote a long time ago, at the beginning of the Christian movement, and in our own age of widespread loss of faith, even of hope in many places, it can be increasingly hard to maintain that faith can overcome the world we see now about us. For St John, in his focus on the love of God in all we hear from him, we should do well to keep in mind that this kind of definition of God as love is certainly not an emotion, or not a general truth, but an event: an event we will soon mention in the Creed when it comes to Jesus. And that love of God for us comes up again in today's Gospel reading from John: Jesus says, "This is my commandment, that you love one another." How can one be commanded to love? If we think of this as our human emotion of love, it's clearly impossible. But if the commandment to love is about action, not emotion, it becomes clearer: his followers have to do something. And the Church has spent two thousand years trying to figure out what to do.

The continuing major challenge of the Church through the ages has been trying to work out Jesus' commandment to love one another as Jesus loves us. If we are going to try seriously to manage to do what St John asks us to do today, we can't say we already have all the answers and are now on the way to success. A lot of aspects of our human nature almost guarantee our failure.

Look at how often we want to draw a boundary around ourselves, and exclude others unlike us. How readily we define who is in and who is out, how sure we are about what defines the barriers between us and those not us, economically, socially and collectively. People who have all the answers about who is in and who is out run the risk of losing a lot of the whole human community, as well as forgetting Jesus' commandment of love. If we exclude certain human beings from our respect, and decline to be interested in their welfare because they are not like us, we are limiting our own human capacities to grow toward a God of unlimited love in whose eyes all humans are worthy of his unbounded concern. If we esteem only those who are like us, and share cultural values and identities, our potential for growing toward the all-loving God is stunted. It is difficult enough, being limited by our

humanity, to love an unlimited God. But if we really understand that we are human beings and not God and so don't have all the answers, we just might, with God's help, find it in ourselves to stretch our boundaries in our search for God in our lives; we just might learn more who we are called to show love in action, and begin without exception to accept others who are different, and thus abide, thus stick with that love St John talks about so often.

Who are we called to love? Better, who are we not called to love? If we seek to obey Jesus' commandment to love one another as he has loved us, we do not begin this enterprise well if we draw defining boundaries around who is "one another". If the love we are being called to is action, one of the actions might well begin in examining in our lives just how our faith and love are identical with both being friends of God and also following his commandment to love all others.

Where do we find potential interactions with those unlike us? Daily life offers many opportunities. Our daily breakfast program draws hundreds of people, many very different from us, and that is one place where love is in action, and the reality of the Holy One among us can be tested by volunteering there: does God's spirit push us to grow, and impel us past our distrust or fear of those others not like us, or is another spirit prompting us to shrink our boundaries with others, draw a circle around ourselves, and close us off from other human beings? We may be sure that that spirit does not come from God. God seems to love people universally and indiscriminately according to Jesus; maybe we need gracefully to accept that our vision of God's kingdom is not definitive, and try to begin to comprehend better that astonishing reality of the Holy One among us.

All human beings have a claim on our good will. And not just good will; our compassion as well. Our Lord had very definite expectations for us in regard to helping those in need whether they are like us or not. If we keep our right actions coming by seeing all humans as God's creatures whom he extravagantly loves, we begin that offering of ourselves that is love in action, not just words.

Jesus commands such love, St John tells us. But can love be commanded? In our scripture readings today, it is important

to realize that from the very beginnings of what brings us here today, the Church, some definite action is required; it is more than mere acceptance, assent, and acknowledgement and recognition of the love of God that is required of those hopeful of passing the final examination: that something more is to overflow out of our own little worlds into love of neighbor, into respect and care for all fellow human beings.

God's people are called to love in action, for that is the greatest love of all loves. It is something we cannot do without. It is something that cannot be done without us. That is the love that brought Jesus to lay down his life for his friends. What he did brings us once again to this altar. What he did sends us once more into the world with a purpose, a world where so many boundaries and values challenge the Body of Christ and separate and divide us. Let us remember that "Whatever is born of God conquers the world." That is our work. And as Jesus tells us today, "You did not choose me; I chose you." God send us the grace fully to become his people.

Amen.