

May 15, 2022 Fifth Sunday of Easter

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church

John 13:31-35

"Not Sunshine and Rainbows"

Douglas T. King

"You are the Sun and the moon. You are every color of the rainbow. You are the air that I breath." The words come pouring out of the groom as he gazes adoringly into his bride's eyes. She responds with breathless wonder. "You are the center of my world. You are my shining light. You are my soulmate."

In the bulletin for the wedding it says that this is the portion of the service when vows will be exchanged. But have you noticed that no one has promised to do anything? I am a big fan of actual vows, and vows that speak to what sharing a life looks like in the real world. They go something like this,

"I promise, before God and these witnesses, to be your loving and faithful spouse; in plenty and in want; in joy and in sorrow; in sickness and in health; as long as we both shall live. These are serious promises. Promises that acknowledge that life can be hard and loving someone can be hard. For all of the plenty, joy, and health we hope our lives with each other will entail, we will also experience, want, sorrow, and sickness.

When I first went to the lectionary readings for this week and found this text about Jesus giving the commandment to love one another my heart sank. What is to be said about that? When the headline is "love each other" how am I supposed to expound on that? Would I be reduced to poems about rainbows and sunshine? It all felt a little thin. But of course scripture is never thin, it was my cursory evaluation that was thin.

Where this text occurs in the gospel is remarkably telling. Jesus share these words during his farewell discourse, it is part of the final words he will share with his disciples before he is crucified. And its exact location is fascinating. It occurs immediately following Judas leaving to betray Jesus and immediately before Jesus predicts Peter's betrayal of Jesus by denying him three times. Jesus call for the disciples to love one another is the meat in a betrayal sandwich. In the midst of those closest to him abandoning him, on the night before he will be crucified, Jesus preaches of love. And tells them "just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

Let's remind ourselves of just how Jesus has loved them. He loved them when they were not smart enough to comprehend what he was doing. He loved them when they doubted him. He loved them as the world was closing in around him and he knew they would scatter. He loved them not for anything he would receive in return from them but rather on what he could give to them. He loved them all the way to the cross.

This is not the love of sunshine and rainbows. This is not the love that exists solely in the ethereal land of shared dreams fulfilled. This is not the love that is only gooey emotion and warm and cuddly feelings. This is the love that perseveres when we are gritting our teeth because life is so hard. This is the love that does not dwindle in the face of imperfection and disappointment. This is the love that is built upon a commitment that supersedes what we may be feeling at any particular moment. This is the love that does not care if it involves giving more than we will ever receive in return. This is the love that continues even when the person we are loving we do not necessarily like.

This is the most challenging kind of love Jesus is calling his disciples to offer each other. And on top of that, he is telling them he will not be with them to guide them through this challenge of loving each other. So, how were those ever-fallible disciples supposed to love like that? How are we supposed to love like that?

It is so tempting to keep score in our relationships with each other, from those closest to us, to the most random of acquaintances. This person was unkind to us that one time so we cannot be loving toward them. We helped someone at some point and they never returned the favor so we no longer want to offer love to them.

But for all Jesus Christ has given us we can never look at some score card and say we have given more than we have received from him. We have overwhelmingly received more than we could ever give. And with Jesus no longer walking this earth, how do we seek to reciprocate the love we have received? When we love those around us, in the self-giving, sacrificial way that Jesus loves us, we demonstrate our gratitude to Jesus. The trick for us is to find the face of Jesus Christ within every person we encounter, regardless of who they are or what they have done or not done for us. And in recognizing the face of Christ in them, love them as deeply as we can.

This reminds me of one of my favorite stories.

"At the beginning of the sixteenth century, when the Jews were expelled from Spain, they went all over—France, Germany, Salonica in Greece. Some went to the holy land. Among them was Jacobi. He was a shoemaker by trade, a round man, with a round face, a round body. He was even a little bow-legged. A kind man. But the thing about Jacobi was that he was so devout.

"He would go to the synagogue every Sabbath and listen intently to what the rabbi was saying, and that was odd because Jacobi spoke Spanish and the rabbi spoke Hebrew. But still he'd screw up his face and listen and listen, trying to catch every word.

"On one Sabbath, the rabbi gave a sermon, and in it he mentioned how twelve loaves of bread were offered to God when the Holy Temple was still in Jerusalem. Jacobi understood the word 'bread' and he understood 'god.' He got so excited he ran home to his wife. 'Esperanza,' he said, 'guess what I found out? God eats bread! You are the best baker in the whole country. Make this week a pan de Dios and I'll bring it to God.'

"That week Esperanza kneaded in the best ingredients, put in her best intentions, and braided the bread with love. The next week Jacobi proudly carried his loaves to the synagogue. 'Senor Dios,' he said when he entered, 'I've got your bread. You'll see, you'll love it. My wife Esperanza, she's a wonderful baker. You'll eat every loaf, every crumb!' And with that he took the bread and put it in the holy ark.

"No sooner did he leave than in came the shammes, the synagogue's caretaker. 'Lord, you know I love to be here in this holy place. That's all I want. But seven weeks now I've been working and I haven't been paid. I need you to do something—a miracle! You should make for me a miracle. I believe you're going to. Maybe you've even done it already. Maybe I'll open the holy ark, and there will be a miracle there.' The shammes walked to the ark and opened it, and there indeed was his miracle—twelve loaves of bread. Two for the first Sabbath meal, two for the second, two for the third, and one loaf for every day of the week.

"The next day, when Jacobi and Esperanza opened the ark and saw that there was no bread there, you should have seen the look of love that passed between them. The next week was the same, and the week after it was the same. The shammes learned to have faith in God...

"And so, thirty years went by. Thirty years later, Jacobi came to the synagogue with his load of bread. 'Senor Dios, I know your bread's been lumpy lately. Esperanza's arthritis. Maybe you could do something? You'd eat better.' Jacobi put the bread in the ark and started to leave, when suddenly the rabbi grabbed him.

"'What are you doing?' the rabbi demanded. 'I'm bringing God his bread,' Jacobi replied. 'God doesn't eat bread!' 'Well, he's been eating Esperanza's bread for thirty years!'

"The rabbi and Jacobi hid to see if they could figure out what was going on. No sooner did they hide then in came the shammes. He began to mutter, 'I hate to bring it up, but you know your bread's been lumpy lately. Maybe you could talk with an angel.' And he reached in to grab the bread, when suddenly the rabbi jumped out and grabbed him.

"The rabbi began to yell at the two men, telling them how sinful they were. He ranted on and on until all three men began to cry. Jacobi began to cry because he only wanted to do good. The rabbi began to cry because all of this happened as a result of his sermon. The shammes began to cry because suddenly he realized there was going to be no more bread.

"Over the sound of their weeping, the three men suddenly heard laughter in the corner. They turned. It was the great mystic of Safed, Isaac Luria. He was shaking his head and laughing. He said, 'Oh rabbi, these men, these men are not

sinful. These men are devout. You should know that God has never had more fun than watching what goes on in your synagogue on the Sabbath. He sits with his angels and they laugh. I mean this man brings the bread and that man takes the bread, and He gets all the credit.

"'You must beg forgiveness of these men, Rabbi.' Then he looked at Jacobi, and he smiled, 'Jacobi, you must do something even more difficult. You must bring your bread directly to the shammes. And you must believe with perfect faith that God will be just as pleased and have just as much fun.' (Lieberman, pp. 31-32)

"And so it was, and so it is."

Sounds a lot like love to me.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Lieberman, Syd, "Challahs in the Ark," from *Because God Loves Stories*, ed. Steve Zeitlin, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1997