



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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Tough Love

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, May 15, 2022

The Fifth Sunday of Easter

Based on Acts 11:1-18; Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35

Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us.

Take our lips and speak through them.

Take our hearts and see through them.

Take our souls and set them on fire. Amen

A friend of mine gave me some helpful advice for this morning's sermon. He said, "You just get up in that pulpit, look out over the congregation, and ask them, "What would Jesus do?" And then, just sit down. I have to say, it's a pretty tempting strategy. Of course, we always *think* we know what Jesus would do, but I find that people often believe Jesus would do whatever it is that *they* are inclined to do. (By the way, recreating God in our own image is an old and fairly well-practiced heresy.)

Still, sometimes preaching about the Christian fundamentals seems, well, just a little too basic. "Love one another as I have loved you." Really? Is that it?" At the Last Supper, after Jesus had washed the feet of his disciples, after Judas had left the building in order to betray him, Jesus gives the remaining disciples his last, critical instructions. "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." New Testament scholar D.A. Carson observes, "(This) new commandment is simple enough for a toddler to memorize and appreciate, and it's profound enough that the most mature believers are repeatedly embarrassed at how poorly they comprehend it and put it into practice."ⁱ

It is entirely possible that the final three sentences in today's gospel lesson may be the single most important part of the entire New Testament. No joke. Because it's here that Jesus tells us plainly the one thing we must do to actually *be* his followers. And the one thing we need to do to be recognized and known by others as his followers. "Love one another as I have loved you."

We've been given a "new" commandment. A new commandment which is remarkably similar to the "old" commandment found in the Gospel According to Luke, where Jesus says, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." And that passage of scripture is remarkably similar to the commandment found in Leviticus 19:18 that says, "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord." Thomas Troeger notes, "The newness of the command is not that love has never before been commanded. The newness is in the source that feeds this love."ⁱⁱ

Loving your neighbor is a deceptively difficult to do. It sounds so simple, so easy; but, of course, it's difficult, because our neighbors turn out to be just as human as we are. We have real difficulties communicating it, let alone, doing it.

Our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, said, after he preached at the royal wedding for Prince Harry and Megan Markle, that he was astounded by how many people, when they recognized him as the preacher of that event (where he preached to more than a billion people), they told him they had not realized Christianity was all about love. Can we all agree that's sadly amazing? It's a very sad commentary on how Christianity is broadly being represented (or more accurately, misrepresented) by a powerful group of people, advocating for a Christianity that doesn't look anything like Christianity to many of us. I can only observe that, "God is not mocked."

The mystical Christian theologian Meister Eckhart wrote, "The soul must long for God in order to be set aflame by God's love; but if the soul cannot yet feel this longing, then it must long for the longing. To long for the longing is also from God." In my life and ministry here in New York City, I have come across many people who long for the longing. And isn't that what it is to *want* to follow Jesus? Isn't that what it is to possess a love that has the power to transform every single part of unhappy and unfulfilled lives?

I love the story about a young mother who was preparing pancakes for her two sons, Kevin, 5, and Ryan, 3. The boys began to argue over who would get the first pancake. Their mother saw this as an opportunity to do a little Christian teaching, and so she says, "Boys, if Jesus were sitting right here, he would say, 'Let my brother have the first pancake. I can wait.'" So, Kevin turns to his younger brother and says, "Ryan, you be Jesus."

That's the problem.

- We all want someone else to be Jesus.
- We want someone else to carry the load.
- We want someone else to make the sacrifice.
- We want someone else to express the love of God—that precious gift given to us as our message to share.

Isak Dinesen's popular book, *Out of Africa*—and later a beautifully filmed movie starring Meryl Streep and Robert Redford—recounts her adventures as a single woman in Africa in the 1920's and 30's. "In the book, there is a story about a boy named Kitau. He appeared at the author's door one day to ask for a job as a domestic servant. She hired him, but was surprised when after only three months he asked for a letter of recommendation to Sheik Ali bin Salim, a Muslim who lived in a nearby town.

"Dinesen offered to raise Kitau's pay in order to keep him, but the money was not his interest. Kitau had decided to become either a Christian or a Muslim, and his purpose in working for Dinesen had been, to see up-close, the way a Christian lived. Now that he had worked for her and had seen the ways of Christians, he would go and observe Sheik Ali to see how Muslim's behave; then he would decide. The author remembers how she wished Kitau had told her that before he came to live with her."ⁱⁱⁱ

I can only imagine! If someone were observing your life up-close to understand how Christians behave, if someone were working closely with you in order to learn how Christians love, sacrifice, exhibit compassion or generosity or how Christians deal with anger, disappointment, tragedy, or betrayal, what would they conclude? "Ryan, you be Jesus!" We can empathize with the sentiment.

The Book of Acts says, "When Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, 'Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?'" Then Peter began to explain it to

them, step by step..." Isn't it interesting? Whenever you begin to open up a human system to a wider circle of people, the system begins to express its resistance. (And that resistance can be either overt or covert.) Peter had to explain it to the circumcised believers at headquarters in Jerusalem, "step by step."

I loved serving as Bishop of Kansas, and I served that diocese for fourteen years. I went through five cars during that time, driving roughly a half a million miles—about the equivalent of two round trips to the moon. Whenever I visited a parish, I would meet with the Vestry and they inevitably had one question for me. "How can we grow? How can our church experience numerical and spiritual growth?"

I would ask them, just to clarify, "Is this your highest priority? And they would all say "Yes." So, I would ask, "Who is in charge of this effort?" And they would point to the priest.

- So I would say, "Great, but who among the laity is responsible for achieving this goal?" And they would say, "No one."
- How much money have you dedicated to achieving this goal? None.
- What strategies have you developed to reach this goal? We haven't developed a strategy.
- Are you reading any materials or engaging in any study that would strengthen your skill set in growing the parish? No.
- So, let me get this straight. Your number one objective has no lay leadership, no financial resources invested in it, no strategic plan, and no training for the parish.

What, if I might ask, is your number 2 goal?

Now, the thing about this—and I'm not especially proud of it, but here it is—I asked the very same questions of the very same parishes, year after year after year; and, to my knowledge, very few parishes picked up this challenge in a meaningful way and developed lay leadership, created a plan, invested financial resources to the challenge, and engaged in additional training for their membership in order to grow their parish.

And I believe the reason for that is that growth was not REALLY their first objective. Survival was their first objective. They knew they needed new members to continue to exist as a parish, but they really wanted people who looked like them and thought like them, who didn't make trouble, and who would bring their checkbooks to the party. Strangely, people don't usually want to join a parish primarily to assist in helping it meet its financial challenges!

St. Bart's has a plan, and we have invested in it. We have lay and ordained leadership working hand-in-hand to achieve it. We are equipping ourselves for a future that no one can predict (or even completely understand.) But we do know that loving our neighbor means loving everybody and doing everything we can to make others feel welcomed to our community of faith. We know it is about letting the "other" inside.

It really does include the creation of "a new heaven and a new earth." The author of Revelation wrote, "To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life." And aren't we all just dying to drink from that deep, deep source?

Saint Francis de Sales was once approached by a disciple who said to him, "Sir, you speak so much about the love of God, but you never tell us how to achieve it. Won't you tell me how one comes to love God?" And Saint Francis replied, "There is only one way, and that is to love Him." "But you don't understand my question. What I asked was, 'How do you engender this love of God?'" Again, Francis said, "By loving him." Once again, the pupil came back with the same question, "But what steps do you take? Just what do you do to come into the possession of this love?" And all Saint Francis would say—all that he could say—

was, “You begin by loving and you go on loving, and loving teaches you how to love. And the more you love, the more you are able to love.”^{iv}

The more we love, the more we practice love, the wider we open the circle, the more we will be able to love. What would Jesus do? What would Jesus do? Well, no one knows for sure, but it might very well look something like this.

Amen.

ⁱ D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Leicester, England, Apollos Press, c. 1991, p. 484

ⁱⁱ Thomas H. Troeger, *Feasting on the Word' Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 2, Eastertide 2009*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, p. 473

ⁱⁱⁱ Gary D. Jones, *Feasting on the Word; Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 2, Eastertide*, c. 2009, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, p. 472

^{iv} *Synthesis, Yr. C, 5th Sunday of Eastertide*, May, 2019, p.5

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