

Rev. Dr. David Holyan

“Love One Another”

First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, May 19, 2019

Revelation 21:1-6

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

‘See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them;

they will be his peoples,

and God himself will be with them;

he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more,

for the first things have passed away.’

And the one who was seated on the throne said, ‘See, I am making all things new.’ Also he said, ‘Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.’ Then he said to me, ‘It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.’

John 13:3-35

Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, ‘Lord, are you going to wash my feet?’ Jesus answered, ‘You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.’ Peter said to him, ‘You will never wash my feet.’ Jesus answered, ‘Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.’ Simon Peter said to him, ‘Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!’ Jesus said to him, ‘One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you.’ For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, ‘Not all of you are clean.’

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, ‘Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But it is to fulfil the scripture, “The one who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.” I tell you this now, before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am he. Very truly, I tell you, whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me.’

After saying this Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, ‘Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me.’ The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking. One of his disciples—the one whom Jesus loved—was reclining next to him; Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. So while reclining next to Jesus, he asked him, ‘Lord, who is it?’ Jesus answered, ‘It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.’ So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot. After he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, ‘Do quickly what you are going to do.’ Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. Some thought that, because Judas had the common purse, Jesus was telling him, ‘Buy what we need for the festival’; or, that he should give something to the poor. So, after receiving the piece of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.

When he had gone out, Jesus said, 'Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, "Where I am going, you cannot come." 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.'

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations, and our faith to You and to the power of your holy spirit. I pray that by the work of that spirit You would find a word for each of us today, that in the midst of the words we offer in song and in prayer, that we've heard, read from the scripture that You've laid upon my heart this morning to share. Your spirit would do the speaking as each of us have kneed, that Your word would minister to us, and comfort us, would encourage us, and feed us, that Your word would guide us in what we say and in what we do not only in the week ahead but in the weeks ahead, where we longed to be Your glory, a light seen in the dark places in this world. Help us to be that light. In Christ name, we pray. Amen.

Simple passage today other than the whole glorified section at the beginning, that to me is a little bit of a tongue twister glorified in Him, also glorified in Himself, glorify Him at once. So we're just going to set the glory aside, if you will, and focus on the last part which is, "I give you a new commandment that you love one another." Here, in the middle of the gospel of John, there isn't the, "as you love yourself" or, "serve and love God and your neighbor." It is simply that you love one another. And I don't know about you, but it seems to me that in the world in which we live, and move, and have our being love isn't scarce supply. I recently ran across an article about a person named Mike Shroepfer, who is the artificial intelligence chief of Facebook, and the whole article was about how the mission of his group, the artificial intelligence lab, has shifted in the light of Facebook's role in communicating and, in some sense, supporting some of the most viscious and vile things that have occurred in our recent history. In fact, the whole mission of his group shifted after a gunman in New Zealand livestreamed mosque shootings. And the video was up on the social media platform for over an hour before they figured out how to take it down so that no one could see it any longer. But as you can imagine, in today's world with social media, an hour is like an eternity. Millions of people saw those images. And his work and the work of his group is, and I quote, how to clean the toxic content out of Facebook, not just the acts of violence that might be livestreamed but comments and content that are toxic to social discourse, and I would say, toxic to sort of good and healthy relationships. And he's convinced, as you would expect him to be, that artificial intelligence we'll find the answer. That out there somewhere is the perfect algorithm to figure out how to identify and remove all toxicity from our common discourse. Again, Facebook controlling 80% of the world's social networking capacity. Artificial intelligence. I've been thinking about that, and I keep coming back to sort of the basic affirmation of our faith, which is that we are sinners saved by grace. And I'm trying to marry the idea that somehow artificial intelligence will prevent us from sinning. And maybe I'm just a pastor and a little stuck in my silo or my pulpit [laughter], so to speak, but I'm not sure artificial intelligence is going to solve the problem of human depravity, as our beloved John Calvin called it, that which makes us sin. And it's in that backdrop of sort of the forces of culture that are at work, and it's not just this idea of what's happening on Facebook. But there are other examples of human striving, if you will, or desire to promote an idea, or someone's self or their business, where the boundaries get transgressed and what is good and fair and right is trampled under the pursuit of either more power, or more followers, or more money, or just simply more.

And it's in the midst of all of this that Jesus offers this command: "Love one another." And as I was thinking about the magnitude of the issue of how does faith shine light in the darkness of all the negativity that's floating in the world, the image came to me of a really small cabin out in the middle of the sort of frozen North at night. This tiny cabin that you can see way off in the distance. There's a window with a small light flickering in it. It's not a starry night. It's overcast, it's freezing, it's dark, and the only light for miles and miles is just that little flicker out there. One candle burning against the entire presence, the seeing presence of the universe. And sometimes it feels like it's that overwhelming. What can I do to make a difference in today's world? How can I stop the darkness from filling every space that is in our social ecology? And the answer, I think, is what Jesus says here unconditioned, "You can love one another."

This coming Tuesday, as Karen mentioned during the announcements, the session is going to host a potluck dinner with the new members who have joined the church and are able to attend. And I was thinking about membership in the life of the church. We have folks that are interested in joining. They come and have coffee. We have a couple meetings. They've been attracted here for a number of reasons: the worship, the music, the welcome, the opportunity to serve, the children's programming, whatever it is.

And as they tell their stories and we get to know them and they get to know us more formally, and they enter the process and they want to join. We ask them to do one thing. We ask them to come forward and in a public profession, answer in the affirmative a simple question, is Jesus Christ your Lord and Savior? In a sense, we ask them, "What do you believe?" And by saying, yes, they answer, "I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior." And then that's it. We don't ask anything else. If they answer in the affirmative, they're in. If they can't answer in the affirmative, we encourage them to stay involved, to keep asking questions, to study, and to get to that point where they can say in good conscience, yes, this is what I believe. But as one commentator Karen Armstrong said in one of the articles I read about this passage, Jesus doesn't ask them, the disciples what they believe. In a sense, his criteria is what do you do? He doesn't say at the end of this passage, everyone will know that you are my follower if you believe what I tell you. Instead, he says, everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another.

And so, I imagine what it might be like for us as a community of faith, instead of asking the question, "Do you believe in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?", instead to call people forward the next time hand them the microphone and say, "Can you please give us two concrete examples of why your neighbors know you're a Christian? What do you do that makes your identity as a Christian obvious to at least one other person?" And it would be fascinating to hear the answers. I suspect that we would hear a lot about coming to church, maybe giving to church or giving to other causes that are near and dear to people's hearts like [inaudible] care or work camp or any number of really great causes. But I also think we would get an answer that is something along the lines of, "I also volunteer my time to help make--". And then there'd be a big blank. And the way that people answer that question of what do you give your time to, or the way they respond to what concrete things do they do to allow people to identify them as Christians, there would be such a rich diversity and beauty of their response. Some would mentor students, some would gather food, some would cook food, some would deliver food, some would raise money for food. I mean, there's just so many things that people can do. In fact, I remember talking to a member of this church some years ago about kind of how does their faith impact what they do, their business leader. And I've shared this story before because it still resonates with me.

They structure their entire compensation package wildly different than their competitors. Instead of the top people making all the money and the bottom people making a little bit and then you kind of have to climb your way up, they had a much more sort of profit sharing basis for how they did things so that if the entity, the community did well, then everybody did well. And if it didn't, then everyone kind of was in it together. And they were convinced that this is what allowed them to attract good quality workers and to provide an environment in which they work where they were happy and productive and and felt good about what they were doing. In a sense, the person tried to implement loving one another as a business practice. Concrete ways to embody what it means for us to love one another. And as I encourage you to think about ways that you might love one another and whoever those others are in your life, I'm also mindful that it's not always easy to do. We all have people in our lives that are difficult to love. I know in my own family there seems to be a division and coming back to Facebook around those on Facebook who are of a certain political persuasion. They're kind of if you're on the right side of the spectrum you're kind of in one camp, and if you're on the left side of the spectrum you're in another camp. And rather than trying to find common ground, it's just sort of shooting accusations one to the other back and forth and never really speaking to each other. And as I was pondering that and wondering how-- what does this point to? It really points to the limit of social media as a way to be in a relationship because when we love each other, we show up and have actual conversations. We say the hard or difficult things but we do it in community.

You might begin to say something that you're really upset about and halfway through you see the look on that person's face and the little voice inside of you says, "Stop talking now." And you heed that voice and you think, "Okay. Wait a second. I wasn't trying to provoke. Something's off here." And you get the chance to autocorrect with each other when you're face-to-face. And social media completely eliminates that. It's just you posting your thought, done. And I think that our relationships suffer because of that. We are not forced to be in relationship with one another. In a sense, we are not invited to love one another. So while it might be difficult, it is a commandment. And I wonder if in the week ahead what our lives and the lives of our loved ones and even our colleagues and those that we have a hard time with, might be like if every time we go to do something we hear echoing inside of us, "Love one another." How might I write that email? How might I make that phone call? How might I have that cup of coffee if the message ringing inside of me is *love one another*?

I don't think that that will, in the short term, have the power to overturn all of the forces of toxicity in our culture or even in our own lives, but I think there's something there that we can try and start to implement and work on to have our discourse be loving, to have our words be kind and loving, to have our actions be kind and loving and to assume the best about the other person, not the worst. To trust that goodness might be the objective not individual gain or promotion or riches or whatever, because I bring it all the way back to that image of that place out there with the candle burning, seeming to be overwhelmed by all the darkness around. And I think about if I was in that position out in the middle of nowhere where it's dark and I'm disoriented and afraid

and unsure, what do I want most? I want to get to someplace where I know that everything is kind of okay. I want to get on the other side of that door in the midst of that light and know I'm okay.

In a sense, I want someone to welcome me as Christ has. I want someone to look at me not as a sinner, but as someone saved by grace. And more importantly, I want to be that hospitable to those who are hurting. So I wonder what for each of us the week might be like if instead of thinking we need to share our perspective because we're right, if instead, we can temper that with how do I share Christ's love? And how do I love you? /My Hope Is that there would be light in that endeavor not just for those we bless, but for ourselves as well. Amen.