

Easter 5C

If someone told you, “I’m doing this because I love you,” and then acted in a way that did not make you feel loved, what would you make of it?

Would you conclude, “I guess I do not understand what it means to be loved?” or would you say, “This person does not actually love me”?

I hope that you would trust your heart.

Now, if we take this one step farther, what if *we* were the one accused of not loving others, would we not be failing to fulfill the new commandment that Jesus taught us, that we love one another?

When *we* act or make pronouncements that affect other people’s lives, and they tell us they do not feel loved, we ignore them at our own peril.

Christ counts among his followers only those who love one another, regardless of what we might *say* about ourselves.

It’s as simple as that.

As Christians, our first question when discerning what to do should be, “Is this a loving act?”

There are, of course, times when people twist this commandment to manipulate us.

“If you love me, you will do X for me.”

There are narcissists who think that it is our job, our duty, to make them happy.

In such a case, we would be justified in feeling unloved.

People who want to make us responsible for their happiness are parasites.

Love cuts both ways, after all.

There is little we can do for such people but to keep out of their way and pray for them.

We must focus on what we *can* control, which is ourselves.

Imagine if someone told one of us, “I would never sit down and eat a meal with you
because . . .”

This is exactly what is happening to the gentiles who are following Christ.

They are feeling unloved by the Jewish Christians whose purity laws say that they
cannot eat with non-Jews.

Despite Jesus’ teaching that love is to the defining characteristic of his followers, the
Jewish believers have not yet integrated this fully into their faith.

They still interpret righteousness as a refusal to eat with uncircumcised men, so God
rolls up God’s sleeves once again and tries to get across God’s message about
love.

God creates an elaborate plan to force open Peter’s eyes.

First, God sends an angel to tell certain gentiles in Caesarea to go and meet Peter in
Joppa, about 40 miles away.

God then causes Peter to have an elaborate dream in which God speaks to Peter about supposedly unclean food presented to him on a sheet lowered by its four corners from heaven.

God tells Peter, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”

Since Christ made everything in the universe from Christself, in other words, God is literally in everything.

Nothing is unclean.

Dividing the world into clean and unclean is a human thing, not a God thing.

God has timed, moreover, the arrival of the people from Caesarea to coincide with the end of Peter’s dream.

Three men appear at Peter’s door and announce that they have been sent by God.

Then, just as Peter arrives with them back in Caesarea, God in the form of the Holy Spirit descends upon the family of gentiles, as the Spirit once descended upon the disciples and other Jews, so that Peter witnesses it.

God is great at logistics and uses that ability to make clear that the way of love includes all of those whom God created.

As an aside, Peter in general, makes a lot of mistakes along the way, but he always faces them and grows, and God never gives up on him (or us).

As a result of this experience with the gentiles, Peter does exactly what God tells him to do, and then spreads the word to others—

there are no outcasts, period.

Are *you* a creature of God, a human being?

Then you are part of the family.

The church is the place where everyone is at home.

It is the place specifically devoted to the respect and love of all people.

I hope you feel at home [here/in the church.]

That is important.

It means that we are fulfilling the gospel.

That is our central mission, that, and spreading it to others.

This does not mean there will never be disagreement.

It means that we will try to resolve disagreements in the most honest, respectful, loving way that we can.

The vestry models that.

We discuss; we disagree; we figure it out; we move forward, and through it all, we love one another.

And who wouldn't want to spread that in a world that is not always friendly?

I don't know about you, but I think that is exactly what the world needs, and in my travels and exploration, we are the only institution that I have found that is specifically dedicated to loving one another.

I spent time in academic institutions, as you know, where inclusion was preached shrilly, but the result felt more often like a zoo than a community.

People thought it was cool to collect different "friends"—my black friend, my gay friend, my Jewish friend, my muslim friend.

It did *not* feel like a society of people who were truly there for one another.

Membership was dependent upon everyone agreeing on all the issues.

Those who were perceived as being out of line were hastily excluded.

This was simply another form of clean and unclean.

Some people excluded based on region of birth.

(It is difficult to be a southerner in California.)

Some people excluded based on religion.

(It was nearly impossible to be a Christian in the liberal arts.)

They could not see that this was the same as excluding based on ethnicity or sexuality.

[Last week, an acquaintance visited an Anglican church near Charleston.

The homily was, in part, anger at the South Carolina Supreme Court's decision on April 20 requiring fourteen parishes to relinquish property back to the Episcopal Church mixed with warnings about the evils of homosexuality.

I thought, “Do they never tire of that topic? It’s a one-note church.”

Anyway, all of these forms of dividing us into pure and impure fall short of the gospel in which we are enjoined to treat everyone as we would want to be treated.

We exclude only those who refuse to love us, though we keep the door open in case they change their mind.

This does not mean doing nice things for those who abuse us.

Those who do so prevent us from sharing our hearts with them in the ways that we would like.

When Christ said that his disciples would love one another, when he made *that* the defining characteristic of his followers, he meant it.

Love that does not feel like love, isn’t.

When we make people feel less than, we are failing as Christians.

When we act or opine, therefore, we need to consider, if someone treated *me* that way, would *I* feel loved?

We tend to offer justifications as to why it is different in our case.

We always have an excuse, but God rejects all excuses.

We are to love our Christian brothers and sisters, and we are to spread the way of love, inviting others into the way.

That is what God wants of us.

We are dedicated to creating a home for everyone who wants to engage in the messy, often fun, sometimes difficult, always beautiful business of existing in brotherhood and sisterhood.

That is the unique mission of the church.

You, in all of your nuttiness, are at home [here/in the church] with the rest of us nuts.