

Acts 11:1-18 The Message

11 1-3 The news traveled fast and in no time the leaders and friends back in Jerusalem heard about it—heard that the non-Jewish “outsiders” were now “in.” When Peter got back to Jerusalem, some of his old associates, concerned about circumcision, called him on the carpet: “What do you think you’re doing rubbing shoulders with that crowd, eating what is prohibited and ruining our good name?”

4-6 So Peter, starting from the beginning, laid it out for them step-by-step: “Recently I was in the town of Joppa praying. I fell into a trance and saw a vision: Something like a huge blanket, lowered by ropes at its four corners, came down out of heaven and settled on the ground in front of me. Milling around on the blanket were farm animals, wild animals, reptiles, birds—you name it, it was there. Fascinated, I took it all in.

7-10 “Then I heard a voice: ‘Go to it, Peter—kill and eat.’ I said, ‘Oh, no, Master. I’ve never so much as tasted food that wasn’t kosher.’ The voice spoke again: ‘If God says it’s okay, it’s okay.’ This happened three times, and then the blanket was pulled back up into the sky.

11-14 “Just then three men showed up at the house where I was staying, sent from Caesarea to get me. The Spirit told me to go with them, no questions asked. So I went with them, I and six friends, to the man who had sent for me. He told us how he had seen an angel right in his own house, real as his next-door neighbor, saying, ‘Send to Joppa and get Simon, the one they call Peter. He’ll tell you something that will save your life—in fact, you and everyone you care for.’

15-17 “So I started in, talking. Before I’d spoken half a dozen sentences, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as he did on us the first time. I remembered Jesus’ words: ‘John baptized with water; you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ So I ask you: If God gave the same exact gift to them as to us when we believed in the Master Jesus Christ, how could I object to God?”

18 Hearing it all laid out like that, they quieted down. And then, as it sank in, they started praising God. “It’s really happened! God has broken through to the other nations, opened them up to Life!”

John 13:31-35 CEB Love commandment

31 When Judas was gone, Jesus said, “Now the Human One[a] has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. 32 If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify the Human One[b] in himself and will glorify him immediately. 33 Little children, I’m with you for a little while longer. You will look for me—but, just as I told the Jewish leaders, I also tell you now—‘Where I’m going, you can’t come.’

34 “I give you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, so you also must love each other. 35 This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, when you love each other.”

Message

Here we are on the fifth Sunday of Easter, in this season known as Eastertide. Which is the fifty days following Easter, taking us up to Pentecost. Christ is risen! He's appeared to Mary in the garden, to the disciples in the upper room, on the beach of Galilee and on the road to Emmaus. Christ is alive – it's a time to celebrate and yet, it's not the same, everything has changed.

Life with Jesus as his disciples knew it, is gone. What was, is no more. The hopes and dreams of many followers for a political uprising and social reform to usher in a golden age, a new kingdom, those have been dashed. It's time to recalibrate.

Those first followers of Jesus are between 'what was' and 'what will be.' They have left behind the tried and true, or it has left them, and they don't yet know what will replace it.

Times such as these are what are sometimes referred to as liminal space – it's a time of transition, a threshold. Between worlds. The old one has been left behind, and what's to come is still a mystery.

That's where those first followers of Jesus found themselves...living in the mystery of life, death, and resurrection. And in the fear, grief, confusion and even excitement of it.

Eastertide is also a season known as "mystagogy" which is an initiation into the "mysteries" of Christ. It's a spiritual process of moving from the visible to the invisible, into deeper spiritual realities, those that can't be easily explained.

In the midst of this season of mystagogy, our lectionary Gospel reading for today takes us back to John 13:31-35. To the Last Supper, Maundy Thursday, to words spoken by Jesus right after Judas leaves the Passover meal. These verses are also the beginning of Jesus' Farewell discourse that goes through the next few chapters. And in these chapters, Jesus provides instructions to his disciples on how to live, in his visible absence.

I didn't really want to go back to the Maundy Thursday scriptures right now. I was hoping for stories about the Risen Christ and his appearances to the disciples - walking beside them, comforting them, breaking bread with them, and yet, perhaps today's scriptures on how to carry on in uncertain and troubling times may be exactly what's needed right now.

Of the two scripture we read from today's lectionary, one looks back and one looks to the future with these disciples. As we look back in the Gospel of John we hear, love each another as I have loved you and as we look forward in the Book of Acts, we read about

Peter's vision from God that does away with the labels of 'clean' and 'unclean' and welcomes the 'outsiders' into the new church community.

These readings remind me of the need to take the wisdom of the past and yet also stay open to what God is creating new, now, and the potential the future holds.

The words Jesus gave to his disciples to carry them into the future was, "*Love each other. Just as I have loved you.*" He said, "This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, when you love each other."

The Eastertide season is also a time to shore up our identity as Christians, this is when the newly Easter baptized members, deepen their understanding of what it means to be a Christian. And Jesus has established love as the defining characteristic "*everyone will know that you are my disciples, when you love each other.*" *It is by our love they will know us.*

And yet, especially during difficult times - times of change, of anxiety, shock, grief, fear ---- love is not usually our initial response. We may be more likely to strike out or withdraw.

Here we are in this season of transition, of now and not yet. When we are not sure what the future holds but we know the past *is now the past.*

We have all experienced these liminal spaces. Those times in our lives when we're transitioning – by choice *or not.* Those who are graduating from high school or college – they're in liminal space – standing at the threshold of something new.

Now and not yet.

When we wait for the birth of a child.

When a loved one dies, our old life dies too, and we wait as new life slowly emerges.

When we've experienced a serious health crisis.

When we go through a divorce. We have a new identity, new relationships.

When there are major social and political shifts, and we wait and watch, wondering what's next.

When a pandemic hits, people are sick and dying, we stop gathering, we're uncertain what the future holds.

These difficult times and many others, are between 'what was' and 'what's next' – what do we do in times such as these?

I'm reminded of a poem by Dan Albergotti called *Things to Do in the Belly of the Whale*, some of his suggestions are:

Measure the walls. Count the ribs. Notch the long days. Look up for blue sky through the spout. Make small fires with the broken hulls of fishing boats. Practice smoke signals. Call old friends, and listen for echoes of distant voices. Organize your calendar. Dream of the beach. Review each of your life's ten million choices. Think of all the things you did and could have done.

So, it's said, change is inevitable, transformation is optional.

Jesus gave instructions for transformation to the disciples – he said, love each other, and he said it the most important commandment. This is how his followers are to become, to belong to, the body of the Risen Christ, this will sustain them even when there are any number of things threatening their faith.

In his book, *We Make the Road By Walking*, author Brian McLaren says, “*Jesus was living by a different interpretation of the old stories...Instead of arming his followers with daggers, swords, spears, chariots, and war horses, he armed them with faith, hope, service, forgiveness, and love.*”

Theologian Ian Paul says that these words from John 13 and the farewell discourse that follows, was “consolation to the inner circle but also becomes a word of consolation to us, facing different kinds of challenges and tragedies.” He says: “The future home with God is found **now in the present**, as we take our place amongst the people of God and as God makes his home with us now, by the Spirit.”

When our world falls apart, when war breaks out, when covid surges, when we're fearful of who get elected to a political position, when stocks are plummeting, and cost are rising, when our spouse, child, parents, or siblings die. When we head to college, we leave an old life behind and begin a new one. It's a good time to return to love. To press in on love.

We listen again as Jesus says, you **do** know how to love, you know how to do this, because **you have been loved by me.**

Author Richard Rohr says: “Perhaps we don't want to hear these commandments to love one another because we can never live up to them through our own efforts. We'd like to whittle this down to a little commandment, like “Come to church on Sunday,” so that we could feel we have obeyed the commandment.”

Love demands a lot of us. We are asked to be vulnerable, face fears, to let go of judgments or forgive an offense. Patterns and responses that are natural and can be difficult to change on our own. It is in Christ and through Christ, as Paul so often said, that we are transformed.

Last Sunday's Gospel reading was John 15: 4 & 5 and a portion of that read: *Those who abide in me, and I in them, bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.*

Another McLaren quote from his book *We Make the Road by Walking*, he said: "Where the Spirit is moving, love for God always, always, always overflows in love for neighbor."

Today, the high school graduates were given the book *Three Simple Rules* by Bishop Rueben Job. These are the three general rules for holy living that Methodism founder John Wesley taught – the rules are: do no harm, do good, and stay in love with God.

Rules for holy living. And Jesus said, "This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, when you love each other."

Last week I had a conversation with longtime Maple Grove member Judy Becker. I have known Judy pretty much since the day I came to Maple Grove over 20 years ago. I was welcomed in then by her warmth and kindness. I really got to know her when we were in a year-long Disciple Bible study together and she has remained a friend and wise teacher in my life. For years Judy served in visitation roles here at Maple Grove. She used to visit the first-time visitors who came to church, and she also visited church members, especially those who were homebound. And when I began working at Maple Grove, Judy mentored me in pastoral care, I went along with her on her visits and she taught me then, and continues to say today, *it's all about the people.* Judy didn't rush a visit, she patiently listened, she remembered important details, taking notes as needed.

She related to people in what Jewish scholar, Martin Buber called an I-Thou relationship, and he describes that as an attitude of reverence, a loving "yes" to God and to others. She treated people as though it was an honor to be with them.

Last week Judy and I were talking about her and her husband, Willard's upcoming 70th wedding anniversary. They were married, right here, in this sanctuary 70 years ago on May 24th. And I want to wish Judy and Willard a very happy anniversary.

But somewhere in our conversation, as it often does with Judy, it turned to the bigger, deeper concerns of life and the nature of God. And Judy said to me, "it is really very simple,

God is love.” She said, “The older I get, the more I love what’s around me.” She went on to say, “we help God enter into the world through our love.”

Holy living. It’s not what we see, it’s how we see. Holiness looks out through the eyes of love.

In his book *The Universal Christ*, Richard Rohr gives what he calls his only definition of a true Christian, he says, “A mature Christian sees Christ in everything and everyone else. That, he says, is a definition that will never fail you, always demand more of you, and give you no reasons to fight, exclude, or reject anyone.” He goes on to say, “Isn’t that ironic? The point of the Christian life is not to distinguish oneself from the ungodly, but to stand in radical solidarity with everyone and everything else.”

We become what we press into. We probably know this to be true now, more than ever. Our social/political breakdown may have something to do with too much pressing in on fear, division and hatred.

In an Eastertide homily, Pope Francis talked about how the Risen Christ had left a message for his disciples to go back and meet him at Galilee, the Pope said we need to return to those moments of being captivated by the love and mercy of Jesus, but he said, “not in a *kind of nostalgia but rather it is returning to our first love, in order to receive the fire which Jesus has kindled in the world and to bring that fire to all people.*”

St. Ignatius of Loyola says that we are to “find God in all things in order that we might love and serve God in all.”

Love is patient, love is kind, it isn’t jealous, it doesn’t brag, it isn’t arrogant, it isn’t rude, it doesn’t seek its own advantage, it isn’t irritable, it doesn’t keep a record of complaints, it isn’t happy with injustice, but it is happy with the truth. According to Saint Paul in 1 Corinthians 13.

And according to our Acts scripture from today’s reading, love is inclusive. Love doesn’t decide who is worthy and who isn’t. Peter’s transformative vision from God reversed centuries of rules and practices deciding who was ‘clean’ and who was ‘unclean’.

Many years ago, I went to a conference in Arizona with some friends. It was about spiritual practices for connecting with the Divine. One morning my friends and I went to a restaurant for breakfast and the waitress was just terrible! The worst I’ve ever had. It was not a busy morning there, and yet she took a long time to get to our table, she made it very clear that she was not in the mood to be waiting on us. After an extended

period of time our food arrived, delivered grumpily with items missing, she didn't check back with us, neglected to refill coffee, and we had to flag someone else down to bring us our check so we could get to our conference on time. However, inspired by what we had heard at the conference, we made a decision to respond with love. It was definitely not an earned love. We each tipped her \$20 for our \$10 breakfasts. It was a gratuitous tip, and it felt loving, not because of the money but rather because we set aside the question of whether she deserved it or not, whether she was worthy or not.

According to Dr. King the necessary ingredient for the Beloved Community was *agape* love. He said that "agape is the love of God operating in the human heart. Agape does not begin by discriminating between worthy and unworthy people...It begins by loving others for their sakes" and "makes no distinction between a friend and enemy; it is directed toward both...Agape is love seeking to preserve and create community."

Maple Grove is one place we can practice creating a community of agape love and strengthen our identity as followers of Christ.

In this Eastertide season of mystery, this time of now and not yet, we recalibrate, and even as we wait for what's to be we can:

- Love each other, as we have already been loved.
- Practice holy living.
- Learn to see as God sees.
- Acknowledge each other's humanity and recognize each other's divinity.
- Allow the Spirit to move in new ways in our lives and communities
- And some days...all we may be able to manage to do is *Measure the walls. Count the ribs. Notch the long days. Look up for blue sky through the spout.*

And on those days, allow this community of Christians, to love you, because that is what we do, that what followers of Christ do, they help God enter into the world, in our lives, through love.