

*Sermon for 5 Easter, Year C
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Good Shepherd, Rosemont
7 May, 2007*

John the son of Zebedee and his older brother James were given a nickname by Jesus. He called them “sons of thunder”, because they were eager for him to “call down fire from heaven” on a Samaritan village which insulted him. At another point, their mother asks Jesus to give them high positions in his coming kingdom. One has to wonder whether they enlisted her help or whether she was pushing them forward in her own ambition. In any case, don’t ever let anyone tell you these guys were ignorant fishermen. They were middle-class sons of a successful businessman before they left their father working with the hired hands and followed Jesus. They were moderately well educated, competitive, arrogant, ambitious, and achievement-oriented.

And yet Jesus picked out these two, along with Peter, to be his closest companions. Only these three are present at the raising of Jairus’ daughter, the Transfiguration, and Gethsemane. The Lord saw in them not their failings so much as what he would accomplish in them. St. James went on to be the first of the twelve to suffer martyrdom. But his younger brother John would become, according to tradition, the only one of the twelve to die of natural causes.

St. John also survived to write two of the passages we have heard this morning. (Yes, I believe that John the Apostle composed both the Gospel of John and the Revelation. The univocal early traditions of the church are not subject for verification to the whims and conjecture of modern scholars in the absence of conclusive evidence.) As an older man, writing his Gospel, John remembers the Lord’s teaching at the Last Supper. “When Judas had gone out, Jesus said, ‘Now is the Son of man glorified, and in him God is glorified.’ Proud, ambitious John, having mulled over these words for most of his life, has come to see that his Lord equated glory with his Passion. Judas has finally set his course to betray Jesus, and immediately Jesus says, “Now God will glorify me.” His glory was in the service he rendered to us whom he loved.

And John remembers the awful new commandment that Jesus gave. “Even as I have loved you, you also must love one another.” Now that sounds nice and domestic, until you remember how Jesus has loved us. In one breath, Jesus says, “Where I am going you cannot come. A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another even as I have loved you.” If Jesus goes to the cross for love of us, we will have to take up our crosses and bear the pain of doing what is best for each other. It turns out that love is found in self-sacrifice, and not in any particular feeling or set of feelings.

Furthermore, this is not just another commandment to be added to the list. It's all very well to hear the summary of the law, "...love thy neighbor as thyself", and say, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus' answer to that is essentially, "Just about everyone." And if I were preaching on that text, I would point out how difficult that is to actually do. But there is also a way in which, as we start to take it for granted, the commandment to love everyone becomes a hazy, romantic ideal. "I have to love everyone" quickly becomes "I don't have to work too hard at loving anyone in particular."

But here Jesus sticks his oar in again. As a sign of our love for everyone, we are *especially* to love each other. So now rather than being self-content in my hypothetical, perfect love for people I never have to meet, I have to love you and you and you and you. And you all have to love each other. And you have to love me, which is hard enough in itself. Somewhere along here we're going to actually have to get to know each other and spend time together, and then we'll end up hurting each other and the whole thing will just be messy.

And what does Jesus say about all this? If you don't do this, don't bother with anything else; because *this is the way* people will know you are following me. Not coming to church, not working for the church, not doing good things for people "out there". "If you have love for one another, all people will know that you are my disciples." This is the one thing that you *must* do.

I heard a story once about a pastor. I actually don't know whether it was a true story or a sort of modern parable. This pastor climbed into the pulpit one Sunday and said, "Little children, love one another." And then he sat down. And everyone was suitably impressed with his bold statement. Less is more, and all that. And isn't our pastor clever. And then it came to the next week, and he climbed into the pulpit and said, "Little children, love one another." And everyone was a little less impressed, because now it seemed like overkill, or maybe just laziness and lack of preparation. And someone must have said something to the pastor, suggested he say a little more the next time, because the next week he climbed into the pulpit and said, "Little children, love one another. When you actually do it, we'll move on to the next thing." That's where this business of loving each other should stand in our priorities.

St. John learned the lesson. The volatile, self-centered disciple becomes known through his writings as the Apostle of Love. He is the one who writes in his first epistle, "God is love." And then there is the phrase, "the beloved disciple", that we find throughout the gospel of John. Nowhere in the book is John's name used, but there is one major disciple who is always referred to as "the beloved disciple" or "the disciple whom Jesus loved". Some people would say that that is a pretty uppity way to refer to oneself, but I think it's a sign of humility. The apostle is saying, in effect, "I am nothing in myself, except that

Jesus loved me and called me to the same sort of love.” In any case, tradition has it that on his deathbed, he repeated what he had taught many times before: “Little children, love one another.”

But if the love of Christ on the cross is his glory, then we should find our own glorification in the love we bear to one another by taking up our own crosses daily. And so it is fitting that the vision in Revelation comes to the same man who has learned the lesson of love. In the vision, God has finally destroyed Babylon the great, “mother of harlots and of earth’s abominations.” And the marriage supper of the Lamb is announced. Rather than the harlot Babylon, there is to be a pure and spotless bride. She has “made herself ready; it was granted her to be clothed with fine linen, shining and pure (for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints).”

If Jesus is the Lamb, we corporately are the bride, although individually we are the blessed ones invited to the feast. The clothing of fine linen is an image of our glory. It is shining and pure, representing righteous deeds. And righteous deeds are things we do in love, actually willing the good of another.

Jesus, in anticipation of his passion, can speak of being glorified. So we, knowing that love amongst ourselves will be excruciating and horribly messy, can speak of being glorified ourselves. When we look around at each other, we should have two images in mind. We should see in this gathering our own Calvary. Here is where we will work out our salvation with fear and trembling. In loving the rest of us, you will take up your cross and die a painful death to self every day. On the other hand, having fought that fight together against the world, the flesh, and the devil, we will be transformed into the spotless bride of Christ, clothed in the splendor of righteousness we have received from him. And so, when we look at each other, we should also see the perfect party, everyone in their perfect party clothes, everyone singing for joy. And all that even if right now we would really like to throttle each other.

“By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” Do it, or don’t do it. But don’t claim to be a Christian without trying. You’ll just be pretending.