

The full stature of Christ

A sermon preached by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Saint John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on May 2, 2010, the Fifth Sunday of Easter.

Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. John 13:34-35

Jesus gives us the new commandment that we should love one another as he loves us. The new commandment, *novum mandatum* in the Latin, is a mandate, not a suggestion, but a commandment. The only way the world is ever able to know that we are his disciples is in our capacity to treat each other in a loving way. The love and respect we have for each other identifies us as followers of Christ. When we don't treat each other that way, we are not adequately representing the Christian personality. It has been said that the true test of a person's character is how they behave in a quarrel.

Christ has been glorified in God and God has been glorified in him. The great song to the glory of God, the *Gloria in Excelsis* that we sing at the beginning of the Eucharist is from the initial Latin phrase "Glory to God in the highest." This is taken from the angel's hymn in Luke's record of the birth of Jesus. (Luke 2:14). If you were part of the Episcopal Church a generation ago, you remember in the 1928 Prayer Book that the *Gloria* was at the conclusion of the service as a post thanksgiving prayer. It was returned to its original place at the beginning of the service in our present 1979 Prayer Book. The first stanza is addressed to God and is based on the ancient Jewish messianic song praising God for our redemption. The second stanza is addressed to Christ based on the Eastern hymns *Kyrie* and *Agnus Dei* that emphasize his passion. The third stanza is in praise to the holiness of God in Christ taken from the Eastern liturgies to emphasize the presence Christ known in the breaking of the bread.

Christ humbled himself to become what we are so that we might be more like him. What God accomplishes for us in Christ is itself a song of praise. It is when we learn what it really means to love others for their own sake and allow ourselves to be known and loved, that we know the meaning of *Glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth*.

The greatest tribute to the glory of God in Christ is that we learn to respect each other as people of God despite our differences whether we may or may not like a person. Just as God is glorified through Christ's obedience, so Christ is glorified by our obedience to be more loving toward others, especially those who make that difficult to do. Sacrificial love is what enables two people to be bound together in body, mind, and spirit. There is no glory like that of being loved.

At the heart of Christian love is sharing one another's burdens. In a world in which there is so little of it, the desire for privacy can result in being unwilling to share others' burdens and sensitive to others' feelings. The desire to be self-reliant must not prevent us from admitting our need to ask for help to shoulder our burdens. It is that same love which helps us to be sensitive to the needs of others that enables us to ask for help when we need it. As God does not remain aloof and isolated against the sin and suffering of the world, so we respond in the face of human need. God is both powerful and majestic and personally present in a real way.

At the end of World War II, when hostilities between nations ceased, Americans came face to face with former enemies to realize that they were fellow human beings loved by God. Think of those whom you don't like and for whom you have little or no respect and aggravate you

by their very presence. Think of those for whom you may have prejudice toward because of a bad experience long ago. Think of how that person deserves God's love as much as you do. Christ's own sacrifice reminds us to love and respect each other as children of God.

Learning to love others as God loves us is the bottom line of Christianity. The spark of the divine can enter in and allow us to do that which on our own may seem impossible. Christianity is not measured by how much scripture we can quote or by how much sin we avoid or by how many people we have evangelized, but by how well we learn to please God by loving the most difficult people. Our capacity for being a loving person is far greater than we think because God always works in us that which we think is impossible. The capacity to love others is neither a natural inclination nor an acquired skill; it is a gift of God's grace.

Those who really love us are those who know us at our worst and still love us. To know and love people with all their faults, shortcomings, peculiarities and weaknesses only reminds of the grace of being loved. Were it not for that sacrificial love in each of us, we would not be free to love anyone because we would see too much of ourselves in others. Only because of God's great love for us are we free to be the people God intends for us to be.

Real love is not blind, it sees everything and continues to love in spite of everything. Real love is not trying to change someone into what we want, it is accepting, encouraging and seeking to bring out the best in the person they are meant to be. Real love emphasizes that we work to become the best person in a relationship rather than trying to change the other.

Think of who has been the most influence to you in your growth as a Christian. What was it that drew you to that person? Chances are it was their capacity to love others unconditionally.

In Africa, where Christianity has grown more rapidly than any other part of the world, evangelism is done in a very simple way. One or two Christian families move into a village and when they see how the members of those families treat each other, and then others want to become Christians too. God grant that the world will always know we are Christians by our love.