

Easter 5, Year C

I'd like to begin with a little survey. Please respond to the question by raising your hand if you want to answer yes.

How many of you love chocolate? How many of you love your mothers? Don't forget Mother's Day is next Sunday. How many of you love short sermons?

My point in taking this little survey is that, our use of the word "love" covers the full spectrum of meaning from the sublime to the ridiculous, and in our culture in particular, it is difficult for any of us to separate the word love from physical attraction and desire.

All this makes it rather difficult for us to know exactly what Jesus meant when he gave that new commandment to love one another as he loves us. But it's pretty important to discern what Jesus meant, because he also said "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

I don't know about you, but that measuring tool makes me uncomfortable, because it also implies that if the world does not see our love for one another then they will conclude that we are not His disciples.

Do think that the outside world is looking at the Church right now and seeing how much Christians love each other? I fear not.

Now let me preface what I'm about to say by assuring you that I mean no disrespect to any of the churches I'm about to comment on, but let me state a few things which, to me, are pretty self-evident.

The largest church in the world, our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters, have mishandled the abuse scandal from the very beginning, and the world is now calling them to account for it. Churches like the Episcopal Church very rarely ever make the news except to report on how we are fighting over issues of human sexuality. Every study on religious life in America shows that people are leaving the churches in droves because they are sick of cover-ups, scandals and fighting. The Episcopal Church is losing approximately 50,000 members a year which is the equivalent of one diocese per year.

And many of those who remain nonetheless go to church less and less as they try to balance religious commitments with sports and other activities that are now deemed equally important. More and more Christians are becoming anonymous when it comes to their faith.

“By this the world will know that you are my disciples, that you love one another as I have loved you.”

Please God help us. Please God help us to know and live what you mean.

Now I am not trying to make this a bad news kind of sermon. Allow me also to say that I think we, at Christ Church, are faring a bit better on the love measure. One simple example is that, since my wife dislocated her knee a week and a half ago, your outpouring of love has moved us very deeply, which leads me into my reflection on what this love is to which we are called and by which the world is to know that we are Christ’s disciples.

You see, when a bad story breaks into the news, church leaders often make the mistake of responding like everyone else: deny, deny, deny, and then when truly caught try to change the story.

But it’s not the story that needs changing; it’s what I’ll call the momentum that needs to be changed.

Let me explain what I mean in more detail. When dinners began arriving last week because my wife couldn’t stand on her bad leg to cook, that moved me very much and makes me love you more and makes me want to show that love back to you. When I do that, you will most likely be similarly moved and then we have a momentum of love going; and hopefully we keep it going.

However, if a parish becomes prone to complaining, then that creates a different momentum. If a church becomes clickish, that creates a different momentum. When people stop coming to church or supporting ministries that creates a different momentum.

But when we create and nurture a momentum of love, then a parish can really take off, and then the world will know that we are his disciples.

**Because love is not afraid to repent when something wrong is done.
Love is not afraid to reach out when there is need.**

Love is more concerned with being faithful than with having one’s own way.

And lest we fall into confusion about what kind of love we are talking about, remember that Jesus simply said to watch him, and do what he did.

And I would characterize Jesus’ behavior as what I’ll call “self-giving, with commitment.”

I have said before that a lot of the Christian faith amounts to putting God first, other people second, and ourselves third. And while Christ Church is a pretty happy little church, the whole Church needs to change the current momentum, and that is going to take a lot of love, and all love requires a lot of commitment. Are you ready to change the momentum?

The momentum begins in the local church; loving each other as Christ loves us; acts of self-giving where we commit ourselves to each other as members of Christ Church.

We then take it out to our work places, schools, and social gatherings and get comfortable talking about our faith and our parish. The love has to be spread.

These have been hard years for the Church, but every crisis is an opportunity to learn and grow, and in this case it begins by loving one another as Christ loves us through acts of self-giving commitment. Amen.