

5.5.2024 Easter 6

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Acts 10:44-48; Psalm 98; 1 John 5:1-6; John 15:9-17

“Love one another”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Chances are at some point, you may have sung the hymn “We Are One in the Spirit,” which contains the refrain, “They’ll know we are Christians by our love.” Written by a Roman Catholic priest and published in 1966, it’s an ecumenical hymn about the unity Christians share as they walk and work together in this world. It’s a hymn that remains relevant, voicing the hope that one day our unity not only as Christians but also as human beings will be restored by the love we show for one another.

The words to the refrain, “They’ll know we are Christians by our love,” have been on my mind this week as I’ve dwelled on Jesus’ words, “*This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.*” Christians are known by their love for one another. They are not necessarily known by the creeds they confess or the theologies they read; on the contrary, those have often divided us from one another. We are known by loving one another with compassion, forgiveness, mercy, and acceptance.

Perhaps these words have also been on my mind because of the great suffering I see around me every day. The hunger and homelessness in our community, the hatred and intolerance I see in public life throughout this nation, and the divisions and wars I see throughout the world. Jesus’ words, “*love one another as I have loved you,*” are the simple sounding but profound command that we cannot live out unless we abide in him.

The love Jesus calls his disciples to embody is described in Jesus’ words, “*No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.*” This is the love of “agape,” a love that suffers for another. It is love that helps and forgives another, that protects and unconditionally accepts another as they are – a beloved child of God. By laying down his life for the world, Jesus belongs to the world, to every human being in this world God so loves.

Agape is God’s concern for others that goes beyond one’s nation, denomination, ethnicity, gender, or class. Describing this love, Jesus said, “*I have called you friends... you did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit...fruit that will last.*”

Like the words of today’s hymn, “Jesus loves me this I know” – this much I do know – Jesus calls all people and nations his friends. In churches around the world today, this gospel is being

proclaimed in many different languages, and like us, each hearing Jesus' voice of friendship and love in their own language.

This sanctuary today is a microcosm of the world – people of differing backgrounds, nations, ethnicity, social class, gender, and identity – all of you have heard his welcoming and life-giving words, “*I have called you friends.*” His friendship does not depend upon the powers, politics, and factions of this world. His love and friendship overcomes them.

Today we commemorate ten years of St. Mark's Soup Kitchen Ministry, giving thanks to God for bearing the fruit of love that lasts. St. Mark's Soup Kitchen is evidence of Jesus' *agape-love* alive in this place. The many hands and voices of St. Mark's Soup Kitchen volunteers have for ten years sought to love and befriend others as Jesus has loved and befriended them – calling others “friends in Christ.”

Today's reading from 1 John puts it this way, “*his commandments are not burdensome, for whatever is born of God conquers the world.*” Abiding in him, little by little our Soup Kitchen is conquering the world's hunger in this community. “Thank you” to each of you have called others “friends,” helping bear this ministry's fruit of love for ten years.

Jesus' love abides in you. Without his love, we cannot bear the fruit that lasts. He is the vine and we are the branches bearing his fruit of love. Over your lifetime, what is the lasting fruit of love you are bearing for Jesus and for your neighbor?

Yet rather than abiding in his love and allowing our friendship to be led by Jesus, very often Christian fellowship has been based upon rigid theological categories and agreements. Many years ago in Japan, I had a conversation with an American missionary who said that if someone were not to listen to him or to “accept Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior,” he was to “shake the dust off his feet” as God's judgment against them, leaving them “in the dust” so to speak. I protested, asking, “Hasn't Jesus called us friends and commanded us to love one another as friends?” He responded, “Jesus didn't send me here to make friends.”

Years later, reflecting upon this conversation, I find it hard to believe that this missionary lasted very long in Japan or in any ministry setting. As Christians, our ministry is one of love and friendship because our Lord Jesus calls us friends, sending us to bear the lasting fruit of his love. His *agape-love* frees us from the chains and divisions that bind us to ideologies, dividing nations, ethnicities, genders, and worldviews from one another. Jesus' love seeks to befriend all people making us sisters, brothers, and friends of one another.

In the chapter that follows today's gospel, Jesus says to his disciples, "*In this world you will have troubles, but be of good courage, for I have overcome the world*" (Jn. 16:33). Abiding in him, he gives us his courage of love to overcome the world's divisions, hatred, and intolerance.

Today we celebrate not only St. Mark's Soup Kitchen, but all our ministries and partnerships seeking to welcome all people into God's house. His grace gives us a love supreme, a love that overcomes the world's divisions with God's unconditional love for all people.

Yet today's world is overcome with hurt and pain, discrimination and oppression, unbending nationalisms, and selfish neglect of those in need. Who is it that conquers the world? – the strongest or the loudest? It is those who, with Jesus, call one another friends and love one another that conquer and overcome the world.

Jesus' love keeps us honest about ourselves and our neighbors because Jesus loves both me and my neighbor. By calling me his friend, Jesus has forever connected me to my neighbor.

Jesus calls you his friend. Allow him again into your heart. Allow him to abide in you. Turn to him in prayer and listen for his voice that you might be his voice in this world.

*As you think about your life's work, what is the lasting fruit of love you are bearing for Jesus and for your neighbor?*

Jesus calls you his friend. He invites you to imagine what the world would look like if all people were friends. Love and friendship are lasting fruit that will outlast your life.

*What is the lasting fruit of love you are bearing for Jesus and for your neighbor? Amen.*