

Easter 5 Sunday, Year C,
Sermon by Glenn A. Brumbaugh
19th May, 2019

Revelation 21:1-6 NRSV / John 13:31-35 NIV

Wouldn't it be nice if our lives came with an instruction manual?

One that gave us a clear troubleshooting guide, if this happens, then this is the fix.

Now I'm talking about a real manual,

not instructions from Ikea with pictures and arrows,

though I'm getting pretty good with figuring those out,

since they are my main furniture supplier.

But seriously though, it would be great

if we could just pick up the manual in any situation

for the speedy solution to any problem.

Now, I wouldn't be a good Christian pastor

if I didn't put a plug in for the bible as a good place to start

in our search for guidance, but often those lessons are broader in scope,

and aren't always necessarily easy to adapt

to every minor routine decision we face in life, or are they?

In this morning's gospel reading we jump back in John

to the scene immediately following Jesus washing the disciples feet,

and Judas leaving to betray Jesus,

starting the process that ends in crucifixion and resurrection.

Jesus knows that this is one of his last chances

to share with his followers the information
that is most important for them to know,
to share that one most important nugget that they need
to get through the tough times ahead.

Now keep in mind that they have been traveling with him for a few years now.

They've heard many parables, sermons,
as well as untold numbers of conversations over dinner,
and probably some lively debates as well.

After all, he is their rabbi, their teacher, and they are his students.

But lets each think about our own educations.

We all have spent some serious time being taught many things,
whether in high school, college, or beyond.

And when we think back to that education, in each arena over several years,
consider the vast amount of different knowledge we studied and digested.

How much of that is readily available at any given moment?

We tend to remember that knowledge that we use most often,
and a lot of the rest is in there somewhere,

but it tends to blur in the background doesn't it?

Especially as we get older.

Certainly we are influenced by overall themes of our education,
but a lot of the details can fade over time.

Jesus knows his time with them is nearing its end.

He has this one chance to highlight

what is the most important in all that he's shared with them
as they've journeyed from one end of the country to the other.

And what was that one nugget? Love.

He tells them they need to love each other as he has loved them.

They need to live love.

After all the theological debate with the Pharisees,
the arguments with the scribes and the Priests over right doctrine and practice,
Jesus tells them that it all boils down to loving each other.

I think it's helpful as well if we keep this short passage
in the larger context of this chapter.

Jesus has just shared the first communion with the disciples,
and washed their feet, as we Brethren call "Love Feast."
He's given them new rituals to practice
and boiled everything down to his new commandment,
"love each other."

He's taken all the lofty theological discussions and debates of the last 3 years
and turned them into a few simple rituals
that reinforce one simple guiding principle,
"love one another as I have loved you."

Yet, as often is the case, we humans can really work to overcomplicate things,
can't we?

It wasn't long before the early church found themselves
right back in the same circumstances,

arguing over what was the right way of following Jesus.

Now a couple of generations later, Christians had scriptures of their own,
and like the Pharisees, scribes, and Priest's of Jesus' day,
they could now argue over right doctrine, and right interpretation,
and who was in and who was out.

They too added lots of rituals on top of the basics, and argued over those.

Baptism alone spawned years of debate:

infant or adult? Immersion or sprinkle?

Three times forward or one time backwards?

We often debate so much

that the meaning and impact

the ritual was meant to have for us is lost.

Christianity over time had often become a largely intellectual endeavor,
full of argument and division,
losing that primal, basic truth that Jesus was trying to relay
in this opportunity to boil it all down for the disciples.

Not all faiths get as lost in the details though.

In her autobiographical work, *The Spiral Staircase*,

Christian author Karen Armstrong notes

that in most religious traditions, faith is not about belief, but about practice.

“Religion,” Armstrong writes,

is not about having to believe or accept certain difficult propositions;

instead, religion is “about doing things that change you.”

This came home to her especially when she wrote her first book on Islam.

Muslims, she came to understand,

are not expected to accept a complex creed.

Instead, they are required to perform certain ritual actions,

such as the hajj pilgrimage and the fast of Ramadan,

which are designed to change them.

Muslims are to prostrate themselves in prayer facing Mecca

several times a day as an act of surrender.

Muslims are commanded to give alms

to the poorer and more vulnerable among them,

as a way of cultivating the kind of generous spirit

that makes them want to give graciously,

as God does.

Armstrong says these repeated actions

are intended to lead to personal transformation.

The point is that this was not a belief system, but a process.

The religious life...made people act in ways

that were supposed to change them forever.

In the same way, Jesus in our chapter today,

shared rituals that were supposed to instill loving one another in us,

sharing in his glorification with God.

Like other faith traditions, we as Christians have traditions and rituals.

However, we tend to get lost in our heads,

arguing over who has the right doctrine or theology,
who's got the right biblical interpretation,
or who's the "real" Christian.

Now don't get me wrong, debate certainly exists in Muslim world,
as well as every other major religion.

But for most of them, that doesn't affect the practice of faith.

Muslims pray five times facing Mecca every day

to show their obedience and submission to God.

Practicing Jews, regardless of sect,

take time to honor the sabbath every Friday evening
and Saturday morning.

These other faiths may argue over specifics as well,

but the core of their faith

is the practice of a common core of rituals
that reinforce the basic tenets.

If we take "love one another as I have loved you" as our premise,

as the intended practical "how to" for our lives,

then our debates shouldn't be

over literal versus contextual biblical interpretation,

whose doctrine is more valid,

pre versus post millennialism, and on and on, should they?

Seems to me if we are to argue and debate with each other,

then it should be on whose approach loves each other more,

as Christ love us shouldn't it?

It's so simple yet too often we make it so much more complicated.

How, in every thing that I say or do,

can I love my fellow humans the same way that Christ loves me?

When I debate an action, which choice is more loving?

Does someone who has never met me

see love in my words, my actions, my whole demeanor?

I'd like to close today with a little story that demonstrates

what influence how others perceive us as Christians can have.

There is a story in Isak Dinesen's book *Out of Africa* about a boy named Kitau.

He appeared at the author's door one day

to ask for a job as a domestic servant.

She hired him but was surprised when after three months

he asked for a letter of recommendation to Sheik Ali bin Salim,

a Muslim who lived in a nearby town.

Dinesen offered to raise Kitau's pay in order to keep him,

but money was not his interest.

Kitau had decided to become either a Christian or a Muslim,

and his purpose in working for Dinesen had been to see,

up close, the way a Christian lived.

Now that he had worked for Dinesen and seen the ways of Christians,

he would go and observe Sheik Ali to see how Muslims behave;

then he would decide.

The author remembers how she wished Kitau had told her that
before he came to live with her.

How many Kitaus have passed through our lives without us knowing it?

How are we living examples to “loving each other as I have loved you?”

That one phrase should be a guide for us in every aspect of our lives,

from everything we say and do,

and everything we support with our time, talent, and treasure,

at work, at school, in our politics, and in our families.

We live in a world starved for love right now.

It seems more and more, love is noticeably absent from our world.

I can't watch the news much these days

without getting so worked up and upset at the hate and meanness

that seems to infest every aspect, not only of our culture,

but so much of the rest of the world as well.

We often feel overwhelmed and powerless to make a difference,

but that is never the case. We have control of our actions and our choices.

In the first Hobbit movie, one of the main characters, Gandalf,

makes a statement that I really think really rings true.

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He says that “some believe it is only great power that can hold evil in check.

But that is not what I have found.

I have found it is the everyday deeds of ordinary folk

that keep the darkness at bay. Small acts of kindness and love.”

I hope that we all take time this week and really ask ourselves

“where is the love” in our own lives. May it be so. Amen.