

**The Church of the Good Shepherd**  
The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza  
Th Fifth Sunday of Easter – May 19, 2019  
John 13:31-35

*Jesus said: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." And may it be so, through the grace of God Almighty: the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Alright. Things have gotten real and serious now. The time for sweet Easter bunnies, colorful eggs stuffed with candy and confetti, mysterious empty tombs, and springtime flowers has passed, and Jesus gets down to what this business of living resurrection really is. And what that is looks a lot like a call to seemingly impossible love.

I am always made uneasy when I hear this lesson from John's gospel. On the night before he is betrayed and handed over to suffering and death on the cross, Jesus demonstrates his great love by taking on the duty of the lowliest slave and washing his disciples' feet. Then, following the sharing of their last meal together, Jesus gives them the ultimate love commandment to love as he loved them. Collecting the original ten commandments given to Moses, along with the other six hundred and change Levitical laws, Jesus distills them all down to their very essence: Love. You are to love others as I have loved you. We are living the promise of salvation and reconciliation when we live as Christ lived and love as he loved. Our Collect this morning phrases it well by saying (and I paraphrase): Living the resurrection means knowing Christ to be the way, the truth, and the life, and we pray to have the courage to follow in his steps in this way.

<sigh> Good heavens, just hearing that makes me want to go back to bed and pull the covers over my head. Love others like Jesus? Please. Sometimes I'm not sure that I even like most people...not to mention love them. This love commandment – we should love others as Jesus has loved us – it sounds so simple, doesn't it? But like most profound truths, it may be simple, but it's not easy. As a New Testament scholar wrote, "[This] new command is simple enough for a toddler to memorize and appreciate, and it is profound enough that the most mature believers are repeatedly embarrassed at how poorly they comprehend it and put it into practice."

Fortunately, as Frederick Buechner teaches, Jesus isn't telling us to love in the sense of responding to each other and our neighbor with a warm and fuzzy feeling. Rather, he is telling us that we love by being willing to work for their well-being, even if it means sacrificing our own well-being. In this way, we are able to love our neighbors without even necessarily liking them. Thank heavens for that. Liking has more to do with the possession of shared affinity and compatibility... loving, on the other hand, is an action. More than that, it is a willful decision to act for the welfare of another. Redirecting the notion of love from the tricky path of reactive emotion to one of conscious action brings Jesus' love commandment into the realm of the possible.

I've often said that that I take great consolation in the fact that Jesus taught that we are to *love* others, but we don't always have to like them. The funny thing is that in the process of loving them as Jesus commands, I often find myself liking them as well. The conventional wisdom of our culture suggests that we develop love from the bedrock of friendship with those we like. Perhaps this is backward. It seems that with Holy Spirit, maybe it is through the very act of loving that we develop the common ground upon which liking is built.

This is all well and good, and I am consoled with the idea that following Jesus means pursuing the cultivation of conscious acts of love. But if I sit a while with this love commandment and I really ponder what living Christ's law of love might entail, I find a deeper realm fear and resistance within me. I suspect that Jesus isn't really making it this easy and I believe that he is, in fact, calling us to love – to open our hearts fully and without reservation to others. And I wonder

how can I possibly live this. I am so broken and misshapen by sin. My heart is too hard and I often do not love in any capacity that would resemble Jesus' loving. The cacophony of the fears of my heart sound something like this: I am afraid of loving, afraid of giving away my love because I may not receive any in return. What if I empty myself of love? Will I die of heart-ache? Will I simply disappear? How can I endure it – the vulnerability, the fragility of being hurt by others and disappointed? What if my deepest fear is true, that, deep down maybe I don't deserve love in return. Perhaps it is safer to merely skim the surface of love and keep my heart safe.

I think the key to Jesus' love commandment is vulnerability. To live the law of love – to love one another has Christ loved us – requires great vulnerability. We have to open our hearts to risk loving; loving those who may not love us in return; loving those who may hurt us. We must also be willing to show our love in the world, for that is how we will be known to be Christ's disciples. That is a bigger challenge than at first you may think, as the world more often rewards ironic pessimism and dismissiveness than acts of love.

But the vulnerability necessary in Christ's love commandment is not an attribute we must learn or develop. Rather this vulnerability is, in fact, the foundational truth of who we are and the very essence of our human nature. Christ doesn't call us to become vulnerable, rather to have the courage to recognize the truth of our vulnerability. Vulnerability is our essential nature – we must have the courage to simply be who we've been created to be.

Last week, I was away at a national clergy retreat at a diocesan conference center in New Hampshire. The purpose of the conference was to provide a space for busy clergy to slow down, rest and reflect, and worship without being in charge of anything. I had a room all to myself where I could let my compulsive tidiness and other personal neuroses flower fully without consideration of anyone else. I had three wonderful meals planned, prepared, and cleaned up for me so all I had to do was show up and enjoy. I got to reconnect with old friends and make new ones. I also learned a number of important things there. For example, I learned that early May is not yet spring in New England, and I learned that New Hampshire isn't as exotic as I might have imagined and there are A LOT of rocks there.

While at the conference, I was re-introduced to the work of poet and author David Whyte. In his book, *Consolations: The Solace, Nourishment and Underlying Meaning of Everyday Words*, Whyte writes short reflections on some of the words we commonly use, using them as philosophical doorways which reveal underlying truths about our human experience. I would like to read to you his reflection on vulnerability.

Vulnerability is not a weakness, a passing indisposition, or something we can arrange to do without, vulnerability is not a choice, vulnerability is the underlying, ever present and abiding undercurrent of our natural state. To run from vulnerability is to run from the essence of our nature, the attempt to be invulnerable is the vain attempt to become something we are not and most especially, to close off our understanding of the grief of others. More seriously, in refusing our vulnerability we refuse the help needed at every turn of our existence and immobilize the essential, tidal and conversational foundations of our identity.

To have a temporary, isolated sense of power over all events and circumstances, is a lovely illusionary privilege and perhaps the prime and most beautifully constructed conceit of being human and especially of being youthfully human, but it is a privilege that must be surrendered with that same youth, with ill health, with accident, with the loss of loved ones who do not share our untouchable powers; powers eventually and most emphatically given up, as we approach our last breath.

The only choice we have as we mature is how we inhabit our vulnerability, how we become larger and more courageous and more compassionate through our intimacy with disappearance, our choice is to inhabit vulnerability as generous citizens of loss, robustly and fully, or conversely, as misers and complainers, reluctant and fearful, always at the gates of existence, but never bravely and completely attempting to enter, never wanting to risk ourselves, never walking fully through the door.

It is my prayer that today, and tomorrow, and tomorrow's tomorrow, we each have the courage to more fully inhabit our vulnerability and dare to love. Dare to love each other as Christ loves us. Dare to love ourselves as we are loved by God. Dare to open the eyes of our hearts to this great love and to live into the promise of resurrection now. It is by this, that we will be known to be followers of Christ. It is by this – how we live and love – that we will heal and transform the world.

Amen.