

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Our scripture passage comes from the Gospel of John 13:31–33a, 34–35. This is a significant passage in John's Gospel in which Jesus gives His new commandment to love. It is this commandment that will define Christian disciples as people who allow the love of God to flow into the world through them and who glorify God by doing so. This reading offers several points for our reflection.

This passage is focused on the theme of glory. John raises our attention to this theme by using the word glory five times in two short verses. John is trying to tell us something about what it means to glorify God as disciples.

First, notice that the glory of Jesus begins when Judas leaves to carry out his betrayal. This betrayal that will lead to the Lord's arrest, trial, passion, and crucifixion. That action, Jesus says, begins the Hour by which the Son of Man is to be glorified. In order to understand how the death of Jesus is connected to the theme of glory we have to remember that Jesus was sent to the world with the mission of making God known. To make God known is to reveal God's glory. In order to make God known, however, Jesus had to make love known because God is love. In order to make love known, Jesus chose the cross as the manifestation of God's love to the world. Only on Calvary could He show the world the depth of God's love for every person, even those who put Him to death, betrayed Him, abandoned Him, denied Him, and cursed Him. The Hour of Jesus is the Hour of Calvary. It is not a chronological hour measured by sixty minutes but the designated time when Jesus fulfills His mission.

In John's Gospel, the cross is the highlight of Jesus' life and ministry. The love of Jesus shown on Calvary most clearly glorifies the Father. There are lots of ways in which we can try to give glory to God. Our efforts can involve verbal praise, bumper stickers, devotional areas in homes, prayer before meals, statues on our front lawn and so forth. This passage not only tells how Jesus glorified the Father but also directs us in our efforts to glorify God as well. Namely, we are called to receive fully God's love for us and allow that love to flow through us into the world so that others will come to know the love of God because of us and be drawn to God as a result of our witness.

The cross was the highlight and mission of Jesus' life. What would you say is the mission and purpose of your life?

Jesus' mission was focused on doing the will of the Father and witnessing God's love for the world. What motivates you to work long days and nights?

The cultural world of Jesus thought that glory involved grandeur, power, riches, and prestige but Jesus teaches us that true glory is found in the love of God revealed on Calvary. What do people today think a glorious life looks like?

If Jesus were walking on the earth today, what would He do in our time to make the love of God visible for every man, woman, and child in such a way that they were drawn to God by it?

Next, Jesus gives us the new commandment of love. The commandment to love was previously given in the Old Testament (see Lev 19:18 and Dt 6:4-5). When Jesus tells His disciples to love one another He also gives them a definition of what love means. Namely, He defined what love means by showing us His love. It is this quality, this definition, of love based on Jesus's example that makes it a new commandment.

All too often we try to define love on our own terms. When we do so, we tend to love those who are close to us (family and friends), or those who will appreciate our love and reciprocate it, or those whom we find it easy to love. In short, we like to choose the people we love rather than loving the people God places in our lives. The love of Jesus teaches us a different criterion. Jesus loved Judas and Peter. To Judas He offered a sharing in the Last Supper even though He knew full well that he was about to betray Him. Jesus offered it to Judas anyway. To Peter, Jesus offered encouragement and friendship even though He knew that Peter was about to deny Him. Jesus offered it to Peter anyway.

Jesus washed the feet of the disciples to give them an example of how to love: humble, sacrificial, self-giving for those who need it and not just for those who appreciate it. Jesus' love was rooted in His obedience to the Father (see Jn 14:31 and Jn 15:12-14). In this passage then, Jesus is teaching us both who we are to love (everyone) and how we are to love. Our Lord's example is to become the way of life which every disciple must follow. It is a love that reaches perfection on the cross of Calvary. The commandment to love sounds pleasant so long as we can define what love means but loving as Jesus loved is difficult and challenging.

Who do you find it difficult to love?

Who finds it difficult to love you?

When you look at a crucifix, can you see the love of God or do you only see unjust suffering?

How does your own definition of love differ from the love of Jesus as expressed and defined at the Last Supper and on the Cross?

How can a faith community help people to better witness the love of Jesus and follow His example of humble self-giving sacrificial love for others?

Lastly, Jesus speaks explicitly about discipleship. He tells us that only when we love as He loved can we be a disciple. This is an important definition because it removes any possible misunderstanding that might lead us astray in our own pursuit of discipleship. Jesus didn't say that disciples are people who memorize religious teachings. He also didn't say that disciples are people who only observe religious rules or perform acts of personal piety. No, disciples are more than just people who go to church on Sunday or even someone who professes a particular creed. Becoming a disciple even means more than just doing any of those religious things. Those things are all very good and can be very important means of grace but they are meant to lead us to the ultimate source of grace in Jesus Himself.

The singular identifying quality of a disciple is that they love as Jesus loved which means

they live out the faith they profess, their baptismal identity, and the grace of the Sacraments in their sacrificial love for God and neighbor. Receiving the sacraments is an important source of grace but if that grace is not lived and actualized in our lives then it fails to reach its fullness by our lack of openness and cooperation. Jesus is teaching us that we don't become disciples until we allow the love of God to flow through us to others when He said, "all will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another". That is an active definition that is demonstrated on the cross.

Disciples, then, must follow Jesus in laying down their lives for others even as our Lord laid down His life for us. After Jesus ascended into heaven, the world could only know God when Love is again be made visible in the lives of disciples — that's us. When we allow the love of God to flow through us into the world then we are allowing others to know God through us. That is an awesome definition of evangelization! This is a challenging message and one that should cause us to re-examine how effectively we have been such disciples of Jesus Christ.

In 1854 the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard criticized the attitude of his fellow Christians including the guilty silence of one of the bishops by saying, "It is the duty of a Christian, as an Apostle also enjoys, to be always ready to give answer concerning the hope that is in him. [...] But how does he comport himself? Pretty much like the boys on New Year's Eve, who when they see their chance seize the opportunity to throw a pot at people's door, and then make off, around by another street, so that the police may not catch them"¹. This hope that dwells in us is the truth of Jesus Christ, and those who witness to it, declare themselves true disciples. Kierkegaard was speaking about disciples who fail to take a stand of faith in difficult times and boldly proclaim Jesus Christ as the only source of the world's salvation and peace. Our witness means nothing if we do not witness to God in the Word made Flesh who laid down His life for us as His friends. Jesus warned His own disciples that if they are ashamed of Him or His words that He will be ashamed of them when the Son of Man comes in glory and judgement (see Lk 9:26).

*If you were to describe what it means to be a Christian, what would be your definition?
How have you come to know God through someone who embodied the Lord's love?
When have you been humbled by being an instrument of God's love for others?
Love can turn even the greatest sacrifice into a joy. When have you found joy in
sacrificial love for others?*

*While we may express our discipleship in a variety of ways, the commandment to love as
Jesus loved challenges us to always witness it in our daily lives. How does the New
Commandment of Jesus challenge you to reconsider your daily discipleship?*

¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Attack Upon Christendom*, p. 67.