

A Widening Circle

Today Jesus gathers his friends together and gives them his final wish: that they love one another.

At first blush, that seems an easy enough thing to do.

There's only 11 of them, the 12th having just left to betray Jesus to the authorities.

Sure, they must be thinking, looking around the room, I can love these guys.

But I'll bet it wasn't long before some of them began to wonder about just what Jesus is saying.

It can't have been long before they start to remember that their own circle, that began with a few fishermen, soon grew to include a hated tax collector (that will be Matthew), and then a member of the Zealots, that revolutionary group determined to fight a guerrilla war against the Romans (his name is Simon the Zealot); and the motley crew even grew to include within its ranks a bunch of women: even the wife of King Herod's butler.

So perhaps even early on they got the hint that this command -- to love one another -- isn't limited to the eleven gathered in that upper room.

Thinking back on their journeys with Jesus; journeys that put meat on the bone of what it means to love like Jesus loves: how could they forget the Syro-Phoenician woman (think of her as a tita from Nanakuli), a pagan, who Jesus himself refuses to help, until that gal insists on his help, turning aside Jesus' insult, only to find Jesus himself including this outsider in the ever-widening circle of love.

So it is with Roman soldiers and skin scarred outcasts and prostitutes and thieves – the command to love one another, as I have loved you, brings in more and more people in the ever-widening circle of love.

In the resurrection of Jesus that ever-widening circle of love moves in unexpected directions.

Like this.

The Jewish people are marked off from other people by two primary signs: the men are circumcised and the Jewish people keep kosher: certain foods are always and everywhere off limits.

These signs are their identity; to lose them is to risk losing who they are.

Which is exactly the dilemma that Peter faces today.

How do we let others in without losing who we are?

Facing the dilemma of whether these new folks can encounter God without first becoming Jewish is the earliest crisis the church faces.

Make no mistake, the dream Peter has, of the sheet being lowered with all the forbidden animals on it, the command to eat, the command that God makes all things clean, is a crisis for Peter: and it's a crisis not just about food.

By declaring all of the previously forbidden animals to be clean, God also declares that all of the previously forbidden people, are likewise, now and forever, clean.

How do we let others in without losing who we are?

Paraphrasing Fr. James Alison:

The kingdom of God is the story of how we learn not to call anyone profane or impure. The kingdom of God is the story in which there are, in fact, no impure or profane people. Even people who think of themselves as disgusting learn to stop thinking that way, in the kingdom of God.

And the ever-widening circle of love increases.

It was Martin Luther King Jr. who once observed that in America, the most segregated institutions in our nation are our churches.

That seems, for the longest time, to be particularly true here in Hawaii.

In this beautiful place, people of many ethnicities and races have, for a long time, worked together, played together and lived together.

It just took us a long, long time to finally pray together!

In my hometown, we had the Polish church, the Czech church, the Yugoslav church and so on.

Here in our Hawaii, the churches historically divided into Haole, Hawaiian, Filipino, Chinese, Japanese, Tongan, Samoan, and so forth.

Many remain that way to this very day.

And yet while we still have miles to go, here at St. Elizabeth's, we can take a look around, and smile, seeing that our neighbors in prayer are Chinese and Japanese and Tongan and Filipino and Chuukese and Hawaiian and African American and Tahitian, with even a few haoles scattered about here and there.

The ever-widening circle of love increases, and rather than losing who we are, we find ourselves becoming who we have always been.

And yet, we still have plenty of room to grow, plenty of road up ahead to explore together, because, looking outside of these doors, there is very little of the Father's love being shown in Christianity today, because, the truth we often forget, is that the Father's love is, at the end of the day, the love of the enemy.

It makes sense that God's love is a love grounded in loving the enemy because, as Paul repeatedly reminds us, we are very often enemies of God.

"While we were still sinners, God sent his only Son to die for us." Rom 5:8.

"He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification."

"You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly." Rom 5:6

"He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all--how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" Rom 8:32

Jesus graciously invites us to love our enemies because God loves us even though, and even when we are enemies of God!

It is Dorothy Day, the founder of the Catholic Worker movement, a movement that opens homes in skid rows all over the world, to provide a hot meal and a shower and a bed for those in need, who realized this when she said:

“I really only love God as much as I love the person I love the least.”

What happens when I apply that standard to my faith?

After the horrific bombing in Boston, none of us had to venture too far before hearing various folks, many claiming to be devout Christians, advocating the torture of the young suspect, or advocating closing our borders to all immigrants since these bombers happened to be immigrants.

A few days ago, a State Senator from New York said, and I quote:

“Who wouldn’t use torture on this punk to save lives?”

At first I was sure he had to be an atheist to say such a thing, but Google tells me: He’s one of us...!

The ever widening circle of love not only includes our enemies, how we love our enemies is the true measuring stick for our love of God, as Dorothy Day discovered.....

As soon as we begin to pick and choose who we will love, we have departed from the way set out by Jesus.

As soon as we decide that some are deserving and others undeserving of our love, we are no longer following Jesus.

When those who claim Jesus as their Lord distinguish the saved from the damned, the elect from the doomed, the chosen from the rejected, we are no longer followers of Jesus—then, we are following the Satan, the ruler of this world’s values and judgments and desires.

The new commandment that Jesus gives is radical, it is extreme, it goes up to and then beyond all limits:

“Love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you, and love one another as I have loved you”— the love that takes him all the way to the cross.

And this is a lesson that while lost on Judas, isn't lost on Peter.

Judas leaves the meal and goes off to betray Jesus; never understanding that loving enemies is the very root of how God loves.

And so, when he makes himself God's enemy, by selling out the Lord, he sees no alternative but self-destruction.

Matthew says he fell to the ground and his guts busted open; Luke tells us he hanged himself.

Either way, it is self-destruction.

Peter, on the other hand, no matter how fleetingly, no matter how dimly, does glimpse the truth of God's love being rooted in the love of the enemy.

So when Peter denies Jesus, three times, Peter is able to turn around, to seek a new day, to accept that even when he becomes an enemy of God, God remains at his door.

The ever-widening circle of love, one that stretches even to, especially to, the enemy, often seems impossible.

Very often it seems a mountain too high to climb.

But we do not climb it alone, nor can we, and yet, the ever-widening circle of love, a love that includes even the enemy, is our destiny.

Nikos Kazantzakis puts it this way:

"Blowing through heaven and earth, and in our hearts and the heart of every living thing, is a gigantic breath – a great Call – which we name God.

Plant life wished to continue its motionless sleep next to stagnant waters, but the Call leaped up within it and violently shook its roots:

'Away, let go of the earth, walk!'

Had the tree been able to think and judge, it would have cried, 'I don't want to.

What are you urging me to do?!

You are demanding the impossible!"

But the Call, without pity, kept shaking its roots and shouting, 'Away, let go of the earth, walk!'

It shouted in this way for thousands of eons; and LO as a result of desire and struggle, life escaped the motionless tree and was liberated.

Animals appeared – worms – making themselves at home in the water and mud.

'We're just fine,' they said.

We have peace and security; we're not budging!'

But the terrible Call hammered itself pitilessly into their loins.

'Leave the mud, stand up, give birth to your betters!'

'We don't want to!

We can't!'

'You can't, but I can.

Stand up!'

And lo, after thousands of eons, man emerged, trembling on his still unsolid legs.

The human being is half man, half horse: his hoofs planted in the ground, but his body, from breast to head is worked on and tormented by the merciless Call.

He has been fighting, again for thousands of eons, to draw himself, like a sword, out of his animal sheath.

He is also fighting, this is his new struggle, to draw himself out of his human sheath.

Man calls in despair, 'Where can I go?

I have reached the pinnacle, beyond is the abyss.'

And the Call answers, 'I am beyond. Stand up!'

The Call is of God's Spirit in which we and all of nature live – calling us constantly out of ourselves and beyond ourselves in order to be ourselves.”
Nikos Kazantzakis, The Call.

Such is the ever-widening circle of love.

It begins with a command to 11 men in an upstairs room; it pushes us to include within it every man, woman and child, and it finds its end in the unity of all humanity, in the joining together of heaven and earth.

For “the one who was seated on the throne said, ‘See, I am making all things new.’”

+amen