

Sixth Sunday of Easter – Year B – Abide in my love

I've been a religious sister – a nun, in common parlance – for nearly 34 years. For most of those years, I never wore a habit. In fact, the first time I actually wore a habit was when Sr. Linda-Susan and I and the Emmaus Community were received into the Episcopal Church, five years ago. Originally, the “habits” sisters wore were the dress of poor women or widows at the time those communities were founded – simple, generally black robes or dresses. The habit was a statement of poverty and simplicity. But over time, fashion changed, and habits did not. And as with so many “customs” or traditions that develop, meaning was ascribed that perhaps had not been present originally. So for many sisters – and religious brothers as well – the habit has become a reminder of “putting on Christ” – a reminder that the one wearing the habit is to “live in” or to “abide” in the life of Christ. It became an outward way of identification, as well. If you wore a habit and veil, you were identifiable as a nun. In really “Catholic” places like Philadelphia, that habit could get you a free ride on the city bus! The habit always reminded me of a song the Smothers Brothers used to sing called “The Streets of Laredo”: One says to the other, I see by your outfit that you are a cowboy. The other says back, I see by your outfit that you're a cowboy, too. They sing together, we see by our outfits that we are both cowboys – if you get an outfit you can be a cowboy, too!

Part of the humor, of course, is that there is so much more to being a cowboy than wearing the hat and chaps, so much more to “putting on Christ” than wearing a habit. And there is so much more to being a disciple than claiming to be a follower of Jesus or reciting the Nicene Creed.

The commandment of Jesus to love one another appears explicitly only in John's gospel, and it comes in the “Last Discourse” – this long passage of Jesus' words to the disciples at the Last Supper. There is no real “last Supper” in John, actually – no mention of the Eucharist as we have come to know it, with bread and wine and the words “this is my body, my blood given for you, do this in remembrance of me.” Instead, John gives us the washing of the feet – and this lengthy last discourse. And interestingly, it is John's Gospel that is read on Maundy Thursday – our commemoration of Jesus' last meal with the disciples before his death and resurrection.

It is in *that* lesson that we first hear the “new commandment,” in the last two verses of that day’s Gospel: “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.*” (John 13:34-35) In a Streets of Laredo translation, we would hear, “I see by your love that you are a disciple... if you love one another, you can be a disciple, too.”

The question that remains, of course, is: “what does this love look like?” Jesus says, “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you,” and then commands *us* to “Love one another as I have loved you.” The second reading each Sunday for this Easter Season, the Epistle, has always been from 1 John, which some biblical scholars see as a commentary on the *Gospel* of John. And 1 John laid the answer out here for us two weeks ago to this question of what does this love look like. 1 John says “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us-- and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.”

He got that, of course, from this morning’s Gospel: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

We usually think of Jesus laying down his life as the literal laying down his life on the cross – and so when we hear that we, too, are to lay down our lives, we might want to dismiss that. I had a dear old friend who used to say, “There are some things in the Gospels that you just can’t take seriously. Laying down your life is one of them!” -- Which of us might really be called to sacrifice our life for someone else? - Actually, it’s more common than we might want to think – both in the past and in our own day. The school teacher or coach who shields his students and dies from a gunshot. The members of armed forces serving to protect others. The persons in the civil rights movement who were killed for standing up for the rights of *all* people. The churches that are burned or vandalized because they dare to speak truth to power or to stand against injustice. If we really want to follow this Jesus, to be his disciples, we must know there may be consequences, yes?

But “laying down one’s life” is most often much more mundane than that. And our passage from First John two weeks ago cut right to it. We heard then, “How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?” Laying down my life means laying down, letting go of, the notion that my life, my concerns, should take priority. Laying down my life may be as simple of letting go of my preference for what we’ll have to eat for dinner and letting the kids choose. Or it may be as complex and difficult as taking a stand for what I believe is right when I know others in my social or political circle will disagree and might think less of me for it. Laying down my life may mean going to visit one of the parish shut-ins when I’d rather watch the baseball game on TV this afternoon. I’m called to lay down *my* life when on what I thought would be a day off, someone calls needing my help. And anyone who has been the primary caregiver for another – a parent, a child, a spouse – knows that caregiving is *all about* laying down one’s own life for the other. Laying down one’s life is not a one-time heroic event; it is the day-to-day discipleship to which we are called. -- Laying down one’s life means finding a way to make the love of God real, a way to put the Love that is God into the flesh in action that is you. Put the love that is God into the flesh in action that is you. It’s so much more than the cowboy hat or the habit.

That takes us to the second directive we’re given by Jesus in this morning’s Gospel: “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. *Abide in my love.*” First John expounded on this in last week’s reading: “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.” And in last week’s gospel, Jesus said, “Abide in me, as I abide in you.” What does it mean to *abide*?

Abiding is somehow different than “living.” Abiding carries with it for me a sense of deep presence. But it also carries a sense of intention. I must *choose* to abide – to be deeply present to where I am. For me, abiding means to be intentionally and consciously, deeply present. And so – these words invite me to be intentionally, deeply, consciously present – to the love of Jesus, as Jesus is deeply, consciously present to me.

These words also tell me that God – whose very nature and being is Love – abides in me – is deeply, intentionally, consciously present in me and in each of us.

Jesus says, “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love...” and then John has Jesus repeat it for us one more time in case we’ve forgotten: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” Theologian Marcus Borg says it this way: “Love one another, because the character of God as known in Jesus is love.”

It is in the abiding – in choosing to be consciously, intentionally, deeply present – to God – it is in that abiding that we find the grace as well as the challenge to live out that love by laying down our lives. That’s how we know we are really disciples. No hat, no chaps, no habit or membership card required. Only love – because that is the nature of God, that is who God is, and thus – because God abides in us – it is who we are at our deepest center.

As we prayed in our opening collect, let us continue to pray: Pour into our hearts such love towards you, that we, loving you in all things and above all things, may obtain your promises, which exceed all that we can desire. Amen.

- [Acts 10:44-48](#)
- [1 John 5:1-6](#)
- [John 15:9-17](#)
- [Psalm 98](#)