

“Sighted By Love”

Sermon preached at Church on the Hill
Lenox, Massachusetts
Sixth Sunday of Easter • 21 May 2017
The Rev. Dr. John A. Nelson

Text: John 14:15-21

¹⁵ “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. ¹⁷ This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

¹⁸ “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. ¹⁹ In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. ²⁰ On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. ²¹ They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.”

1

A chess story came over the radio a few weeks back. My ears perked up, because I do love the game of chess.

The former world champion, Gary Kasparov, who once played a famous public match against an IBM computer, organized a chess tournament in which teams of humans and computers could work together. The results were unexpected. The winning team had no grandmaster. It had no supercomputer. Instead, it had better teamwork. The tournament showed that a team of humans and computers working together could beat any computer or any human working alone.¹

I have searched in vain for any reference to chess in the Bible. Still, that story connects with the gospel we have this morning.

It says that we are stronger united, to be sure. We keep re-learning that lesson. One stick can be easily broken; a bundle of sticks can withstand exponentially greater pressure. A quick scan of the Bible and you might think this is a core message: we find strength in unity. But it's worth noting, especially in today's scary public climate, that in ancient Rome, when the Gospel of John was written, strength in unity became a political symbol: a bundle of rods lashed around an axe. The symbol is known as the *fascis*, from which the English word “fascist” is derived.

Strength in unity can be for ill, as much as it can be for good. So we push deeper.

2

Jesus said to his disciples, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (14:15).

All you need is love, says the song. But has the message gotten through?

All you need is love, says the letter of John. God is love.

¹ www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=524700928. Retrieved 19 May 2017.

It does seem to be one rare area of agreement among believers of widely varying convictions. To love is to know God. Would that it were so simple.

Reminds me of the story of two youngsters in the back seat on a car trip. On the road long enough they were annoyed with each other: ever experienced that? One singing, “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” Repeatedly. “Jesus loves me, this I know....” Her sister had enough: “Will you stop singing that song! Jesus loves *everybody*.” “I know,” says the singer. “That’s the problem.”

And in all seriousness, even if the song is repetitive, even if the scripture is hitting us over the head with the message — it hasn’t sunk in. We have yet to absorb God’s Word of love.

Which is no surprise. The disciples apparently were slow to absorb God’s Word, too: otherwise Jesus would not have spent his last hours with them, before his arrest and state-sanctioned execution, giving these final instructions, ultimate reminders:

Show your love for me by keeping my commandments.

I will disappear from the sight of the world, but not from your sight. Because you see with the eyes of love.

The Bible preaches love, but it gives no quick fix and it doesn’t explain why love is in such seeming short supply. We remember that John wrote his gospel when the *fascies* was not an abstract idea but a real symbol of real, brutal power by the Roman empire. It’s all too easy to see the connections between that empire and the increasingly fascist American empire, chewing up people for the sake of profits, demonizing its opposition, concentrating power in the hands of the rapacious few, mostly men, mostly white, mostly dismissive of anyone who doesn’t look like them.

If any rational person were to look for a way to counter the imperial powers, then or now, something as seemingly powerless as love would make no sense. But following Jesus only makes sense if you’re prepared to give up even the hope of victory for something else.

3

The something else has to do with the love that Jesus taught. There’s more than one kind, of course. The meaning in widest circulation these days seems to be along the lines of an intense feeling of affection. But we’re in Bible territory, here, and our ancient brothers and sisters knew that one word couldn’t cover the complexities of this mystery.

There is a form of love that is mostly about desire and longing, *eros*, and it is a gift of God. But it’s never mentioned in the New Testament. There is another form of love grounded in mutuality and reciprocity: *philia*, the kind of love you may have had the gift of knowing if you have served alongside someone and entrusted your well-being into his or her hands, knowing that your trust was well-placed, knowing that your relationship could achieve what would be impossible for either of you alone. *Storge* also means love: the kind of love you find in family, where age invests its heart and hope in the next, where youth finds in its elders love in practice and a bulwark against mortality.

And there is *agape* love, which is the only word used in the Bible passage today. In this form of love, you no longer focus on concern for yourself, but without seeking reward you give of yourself, freely, for the good of all.

If love is going to heal the world, it will need every variety. But the last, *agape*, has a special place in Jesus' teaching. And it's not exactly something you and I can just decide we're going to practice. "Starting today, I'm going to be totally selfless!" Doesn't work, especially if such a declaration mostly serves to make me feel good about myself.

No, the *agape* love that the Bible knows is our best nature comes by practice. We practice seeking the goodness in self and others; we practice finding goodness and building life around it.

The beginning of love is the will to let those we love be perfectly themselves, the resolution not to twist them to fit our own image. (Thomas Merton)

It's not magic: just the practice of seeing with the eyes of *agape* love. The day-in, day-out remembering that our well-being is contingent on the well-being of our neighbors.

There was an anthropologist who had been studying the culture and habits of an African tribe. The last day of his stay, he proposed a game to the children.

He prepared a big basket of fruit and treats from the region and placed it under a tree. He marked a line on the earth a few meters away and instructed the children to run at the count of three, and whoever reached the basket first, would win the whole thing.

When he said "Go!" to his surprise the children held each other's hands and ran off towards the tree as a group. Once there, they happily shared the treats with one another.

He asked the children why they had done such a thing when one of them could have gotten the whole basket for him or herself. One child answered, "How can one of us be happy if all the other ones aren't?"

I don't know if that story happened, but I do know it's true. The children could not see the patterns of empire that the anthropologist was carrying with him. The anthropologist, for his part, could not see what was plain as day to the children.

Because the faith that is ours through the Risen Christ has nothing to do with winning a contest, nor developing a mastery, nor defeating an opposition. Much as I like the game of chess, when I see it through the eyes of *agape* love, the desirable outcome is that my opponent and I both win.

4

Imagine focusing yourself on that faithful practice: that whomever you meet today, you will seek to recognize in them the source of love, and let them see the source of love in you.

In today's gospel, Jesus said:

Show your love for me by loving God above all, and your neighbors as though they are a part of you.

God, whom I have introduced you to as my Poppa, will send another in my place: the Spirit of truth, whom you will recognize because the Spirit is already within you, a part of you. When you recognize your True Self, you will find me again.

I will disappear from the sight of the world, but not from your sight. Because you see with the eyes of love. Those who twist love or deny love or disorder love or demean love or cheapen love will not see me. But you will. You will see that there is no

separation between me and God, between me and you, between you and God, but all are perfectly united.

We may never live to see God's realm established in every corner of the earth. But if it is up to you and me — and it is — put on the lens of *agape* love: see heaven where you are, and let others see it in you.

And if this is the first sermon you have ever heard, and in case it is the last that you hear, remember this:

the holy home of God in you,
of you in God,
of all in the Risen Christ,
is within your sight even now.