



Fifth Sunday of Easter
Rev. Dcn. Tim Jones
May 19, 2019
John 13:31-35

One of my favorite poets is Mary Oliver. She wrote poem called "In Blackwater Woods." It's about autumn and coming to terms with what that season means. I want to offer it this morning as insight into the context of what Jesus is saying in today's Gospel reading. By the time we get to the events described in John 13 Jesus and his disciples are a long way from those early green days when they first left everything to follow him. They are a long way from the bright sunny days of crowds and miracles and parables. It is the autumn of their time together. When they gather in the upper room to celebrate Passover together it is the last light of that season---right on the edge of the darkness of Gethsemane and Good Friday. Their time together is swiftly coming to a close. The full weight of that seasonal shift hangs over today's Gospel so I offer this poem as an entry point into why Jesus speaks these vital words.

Look, the trees
are turning
their own bodies
into pillars

of light,
are giving off the rich
fragrance of cinnamon
and fulfillment,

the long tapers
of cattails
are bursting and floating away over
the blue shoulders

of the ponds,
and every pond,
no matter what its
name is, is

nameless now.
Every year
everything
I have ever learned

in my lifetime
leads back to this: the fires
and the black river of loss
whose other side

is salvation,
whose meaning
none of us will ever know.
To live in this world

you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it

against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.

Autumn is a season of two things: letting go and profound beauty that emerges in the process of letting go.

I am now exactly the same age my father was when he died. I grew up in a single parent home with my father. He raised me while he was in a wheelchair and from the time I was six years old it was just the two of us --against the world. But I did not get to be there with my Dad when he died. He was 250 miles away in Durham at Duke University Medical Center when his health took a sudden decline. I did, however, get to share some phone time with him. I am not sure any of us ever really know how to say goodbye, but that phone conversation was our attempt to do just that.

I remember him saying to me on the phone, "Dying is a lot harder than I thought it would be." At first I did not understand what he meant by that. He didn't seem to be in a lot of pain. He knew where he was going. His faith was always so much stronger than mine has ever been. Since 1972 he had fought so hard every single day to stay alive and raise me. His body was just worn out. I knew he was tired. But then he explained what he meant. He said, "It's hard to let go."

There was a sense of unfinished business. He knew he was not going to see his grandchildren grow up. He knew there was so much I still needed to learn about life. Even though at 26 years old, I thought I knew everything. He knew better.

It's always hard to let go. When you know your time with loved ones is short it has a way of stripping away all of the nonessentials. It clarifies what is vital. It's sort of like studying the night before a big test the next morning. You don't have time to go back and read the whole textbook again. You review the highlighted parts: the things that are most important--the things that you know are going to be on the exam.

My father and I both knew our window of time to speak with each other was closing and I could tell that he was trying to distill the meaning of all our lived experiences together into just a few vital things. I have forgotten so many conversations in my life, but I will never forget that phone conversation with my dad. He said, "Tim, "I want you to always remember that God is real and God is love and that's enough." That is what wanted me to hold onto as we were letting go and it was profoundly beautiful.

He made it sound so simple, but that's what happens in the end. All of the complex little things give way to the one or two big things. "God is real. God is love and that's enough." It's what my dad believed would be on the final exam. It was so important that I have wagered everything in my life on it since then. It's why I am now in the Episcopal Church. It's why I do what I do in my daily vocation at the homeless shelter.

I agree wholeheartedly with Mary Oliver. We love what is mortal. We hold it against our bones knowing our own lives depend on it and then we have to let it go, but some things never let go of us. We are marked by what we have held against our bones and even in letting go of that which is mortal, something always remains.

As he was letting go, my father was giving me something important---something eternal to hold on to.

I believe that was exactly what was going on in the upper room between Jesus and his disciples. Jesus knows things are about to change. Time is short. They will no longer physically be together the way they had been for so long. It's a very intimate time of getting ready to let go. John 13 begins with these words: "**Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.**" Then we hear Jesus speak these words in verse 35 of today's reading: "**Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said... 'Where I am going, you cannot come.'**"

That's our clue that there is now a sense of urgency behind what he's about to tell them. He has spent years teaching them and equipping them to carry out his mission on the world and now it's time for the final review of what is most important.

So he boils it down into one vital thing---one final mandate. It's as if he is saying, if you get nothing else, don't miss this. This is what's going to be on the final exam.

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.

There is nothing new about that. It's actually quite old. It's been there from the beginning. It was the part of the ancient Hebrew Scriptures that Jesus highlighted and moved to the front and center. He spent almost the entire time going around with your disciples talking about love. How in the world can that be a NEW commandment?

It's not. Here's the NEW part: ***Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.*** That's the BIG DEAL!! Jesus was not talking about some sort of abstract, ethereal notion of love. He says to all who would be his followers, I want you to love people the way I have been loving you. That's how all people will know you are **my** disciples.

That was also when it should have started to dawn on his followers, "Oh...so **that's** what the last few years have been about." Jesus had been showing them how to love. That's what he had been doing all evening in the upper room with them.

When Jesus says I want you to love just as I have loved you---he has just done two things with his disciples.

First of all, as they celebrated the passover meal together, Jesus instituted the Holy Eucharist. Second, he washed their feet. **Worship and service**---those are the two movements that make up the rhythm of the Christian life. 2000 years later we still gather every week to share Holy Eucharist and then we go out and serve others his name.

My sisters and brothers I submit to you that at the heart of both of those things is this new command Jesus gives. You see, it wasn't about dirty feet or bread or wine. It was about love. With Jesus it's always about love!

Whatever else we think we think is going on when we gather around this table week after week, the heart and core of the matter is this almost unbelievable, scandalously large love made known through the human life of Jesus.

If our sacramental theology doesn't cause us to love others the way Jesus loved, then we have surely missed the point.

If our outreach and our missions efforts are not about loving others the way Jesus loved, then we have surely missed the point. When I feed hungry people every day at the homeless shelter sometimes it's easy to get so caught up in the details that I start to think it's really about the food or how many meals we served this year. But John 13 reminds me that if my efforts to alleviate hunger in my community are not about fulfilling this new command of Jesus then I have surely missed the point.

The great challenge of all of this is that the kind of love that was revealed through the life and actions of Jesus is not always easy to imitate because it's a love that doesn't give up on others. That means if we love just as Jesus loved his disciples we cannot give up on each other or on ourselves.

John 13 tells us that Jesus shared the bread and wine with the disciple he knew was going to deny him three times, because Jesus never stopped loving him. Jesus washed the very feet that were about to go out into the night and bring back the people who were going to arrest him. Jesus washed the feet of Judas, because even though Judas gave up on himself, the heart of Jesus never did. Remember, this chapter starts out by telling us that he loved all of them to the end.

Only when we take **that** it account do we begin to realize just how **enormous** this new command to love like Jesus really is.

When our natural inclination is to be stingy with the scope of our love, this new commandment explodes it wide open. When we are tempted to go down the path of putting up qualifications and exclusions on our love, this new mandate from Jesus challenges us to turn around and run in the exact opposite direction.

We may have nothing in common that would naturally cause us to like each other. We might detest each other's politics and disagree on just about everything, but we can still come together each week and share the body and blood of Christ together. We can still get over ourselves and with humility wash each other's feet and serve each other over and over because at the center of the mystery of God is a love that never gives up --a love that keeps on going to the very end!

In the end that is the one big beautiful thing he wanted his followers to grasp. That's what is going to be on the final exam. The measure of our lives will not be how many times we took communion or even how many people we served. The standard by which Jesus says our lives will be measure is how often did we love people the way he loved people. That is how everyone will know that we are his disciples!

In that upper room so long ago in the autumn twilight of their time together, Jesus and his disciples were engaged in this hard work of letting go of that which is mortal. In doing so, Jesus gave all of his followers something beautiful and eternal to hold on to. ***Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.***

That new commandment is what we hold close to our bones like our own lives depend on it, because today's Gospel tells us that in the end, they really do!

Amen