**1** [**Acts 11:1-18**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=137#hebrew_reading)

[**Psalm 148**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=137#psalm_reading)

[**Revelation 21:1-6**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=137#epistle_reading)

[**John 13:31-35**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=137#gospel_reading)

**CHRIST’S LOVE Sermon for May 19, 2019**

In the movie The Princess Bride, one of the characters keeps using the word 'inconceivable' wrongly, and at a certain point another character, one of the heroes, turns to him and says, “You keep using that word, but I do not think it means what you think it means.”

I think the same sort of thing might be true of many of the ways we interpret the words of Jesus. The problem is this: language is used to make communication easier and more informative, so that it can thereby make human interaction more comfortable and effective. Before it has acquired language, a baby can only scream to express its pain; but with the acquisition of language, the baby is able to say *My tummy hurts*, which in turn gives the mother the means of interacting more effectively with her baby.

That's a simple example, but in a nutshell it tells you pretty much all there is to know about why language exists. The problem comes because as language becomes more mature and complex, certain words are asked to all sorts of jobs when it comes to this issue of facilitating communication. A perfect example of that is the word 'love.'

Even though we use the word all the time, if you ask a dozen different people what the word means, or what the verb 'to love' means, you'll almost certainly get a dozen different answers, and that's because the word has so many different uses. I don't love my country the way I love my dog, and I don't love either of them the way I love Cheetos or the way I love to tell a joke. Whatever my love of freedom is, it's almost certainly something different from my love of my mother, and both are different from my love of the Steelers.

So what is love? Is it a feeling? If so, where is the feeling located? In the heart? But the heart is just an organ for pumping blood. Is it an emotion? But then, does it just disappear when I'm sleeping, the way anger or joy does?

And so on and on. You see the problem?

And the problem becomes particularly troublesome when we realize that Jesus places that particular word at the very center of His teaching. In our Gospel selection for today, we see Jesus, knowing now that the path before Him to the Cross can no longer be changed, that his earthly time is almost over, knowing that these will be the last things His last message to His disciples, sums up that instruction in these words:

*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.*

Feel about one another the way I feel about you.Suppose I said that to you, would you know what I was telling you to do? Of course not! You don't know enough about my interior life, and how could you? I have no idea what your feelings are like, any more than you do what mine are like, and none of us have any idea what the feelings of Jesus, the man-God, are like.

So he is clearly not instructing them to feel something in particular for each other. So what is He telling them?

I don't think the answer lies in trying to figure out what *we* mean when we speak of love, since we've already seen that we don't actually know what we mean. I think the way to begin to understand Jesus, here and everywhere, is not to look at ourselves at all, but to look at Jesus.

His final instruction to His disciples is that, regardless of what name they attach to it, they should strive to have the same attitude towards each other that He has had towards them, and to behave towards each other the way He has always behaved towards them. We find his meaning, therefore, not by examining our attitudes and behavior, but by examining His. We do not discern what *I’m* like, and use that the understand Jesus. We ask, what is He like, and use that to understand ourselves.

And what do we find when they do that? I’m going to mention two things. The first is Jesus always relied on understanding. Jesus knew His disciples through and through. John tells us in the very first chapter of His Gospel how Jesus was gathering His very first disciples, when He saw one of them, Nathaniel.

*Jesus saw Nathaniel coming towards him and said of him, 'Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!' Nathaniel said to Him, “How do you know me?' Jesus answered him, 'Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.' (47-48).*

Whether by supernatural or natural means, Jesus made Himself thoroughly acquainted with His disciples. He didn't base His own behavior towards them simply on His own feelings, but rather on a thorough knowledge of who they were.

Here's an experience I've had many times in my life, and I wonder whether others haven't had the same experience. You meet someone in one setting, at a workplace, for example, and you really don't care for that person. You don't like their attitude, the way they act or the things they say. You just can't figure out why this person is so nasty or lazy or incompetent or whatever....you fill in the blank. Over time, just about everything that person does reinforces the opinion you've formed of him or her.

And then one day, you happen to meet that person in the company of his or her family or friends. Maybe you run into them at Walmart or watching a high school basketball game or whatever. And you suddenly see that that person has children who love her, or a wife who's sitting comfortably alongside him, or friends who enjoy her company. And suddenly it's like scales fall from your own eyes, and you realize that this person has a whole, complicated life outside the very narrow and prickly relationship with you.

I can honestly report that every time that's happened to me, my attitude towards the person in question changed for the better. On a couple of occasions, we even became friends.

When Jesus tells His disciple to imitate His own example, surely that’s one of the things He was saying: take the trouble to learn about one another, make an effort to understand. Put your judgment on the back burner while you really get to know one another.

Another striking thing about the attitude Jesus had towards His disciples was that it was sacrificial.

Jesus himself helped define what he meant by 'love' when he linked it with sacrifice in John 15:

*Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends. (v. 13)*

If we are honest with ourselves, I think we would acknowledge that when we are dealing with others, except for a very few like close relatives, we usually put our own interests first in deciding what to do. We think: Well, today I've got to do A, B and C, and then, if I have a little time left over, maybe I'll stop by and visit so-and-so. It seldom even occurs to us to *sacrifice*something we want to do or feel we have to do, in order to do something for someone else. We *fit them in* around the things we want to do.

But that's just the opposite of the way Jesus lived His life. He never fit the interests of others in around His own. On the contrary. That's the lesson He taught us through the way He instructed the rich young man who came to Him and asked what he had to do to gain the life of heaven, and Jesus said:

“*Sell all you have and give it away, and then come and follow me.”*

Sell all you have, sacrifice your own life. Elsewhere Jesus said, *“If you want to keep your own soul, your own life, your own priorities, you can have them, but that's all you'll ever have. It's only by giving them up, by sacrificing them, that you are able to begin sharing my life.”*

Do we find anything in our human experience that contains a trace of this connection between love and sacrifice? I think we do, in the relationship of parenthood.

**The old saying goes that the parent gives birth to the child, and the child gives birth to the parent, and the truth of that old saying points to the fact that entering into parenthood is necessarily leaving another condition of life behind, sacrificing it, if you will. The material sacrifices are obvious, those of time and energy and sleep and money, but there are many others.**

**In parenthood, one's self-centeredness becomes a thing of the past. Once having taken the responsibility of bringing another human being into existence, from that time on a whole new set of variables must enter into every calculation of what to do next, what plans to make for tomorrow, how to pattern one's own life to accommodate this other center of consciousness that's now a part of that life.**

**Even more subtly, and perhaps more importantly, parenthood involves a sacrifice of one's own moral judgmentalism, one's own moral compass.**

**The normal human condition is that we all extend to ourselves a forgiveness that we are reluctant to extend to others. But parenthood stands in contrast to that normal human condition, and we find parents extending the forgiveness normally reserved to themselves to their children. The ordinary experience of all of us, I would wager, provides confirmation. All of us, if we could, would hope that our mothers might be sitting at the judge's side when we come to trial, whispering explanations into the judge's ears.**

**And I think with that in mind, when we read the very first verse of our Gospel passage for today, we might find a clue as to what Jesus is asking of His disciples. Let’s read it again.**

When [Judas] had gone out, Jesus said, “Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him. 32 If God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once. 33 Little children, yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me, and just as I said to the Jews, so now I also say to you, ‘Where I am going you cannot come.’

To love as Jesus loves is to love as a parent loves her children, to seek to know each other inside and out, to sacrifice oneself, most of all, to forgive, even when the rest of the world condemns.

That’s the way of love that Jesus asks of each of His followers, of all of us.

And so, Gracious God, our message prayer for this morning is that You strengthen us in love for each either, that You make us curious to know each other, heedless and bold to sacrifice for one another, sympathetic and impervious to ridicule to forgive one another. Provide the tent of Christ’s own attitude to shelter the community of Christians, to bring us together and protect us from the ways of the fallen world. Bind us together in Christ’s love, because we ask it in Christ’s name. Amen.