

C Easter 5 5.15.22

Acts 11:1-18; John 13:31-35

Focus Statement: Jesus loves us, we love others.

If you were at the Maundy Thursday service a couple of weeks ago. Five weeks, to be exact, this being the fifth Sunday of Easter, this passage probably sounds very familiar. Because we read it five weeks ago, at the Maundy Thursday service. Maundy Thursday, the day where we sit in anticipation of what we know is coming, Jesus' betrayal, suffering, and death on a cross, is a very different setting from today, deep in the middle of the Easter season. So what I want to do this morning is look at how this passage might have landed for the disciples on Maundy Thursday, how it maybe landed that day for us, and then how we might hear Jesus' words differently today, in light of all that has happened since then. So, to start, I invite you to travel back with me five weeks and two-thousand years ago, to seven pm on a Thursday evening, and the start of chapter thirteen.

Chapter thirteen began with the declaration, "Jesus knew that his hour had come." Jesus' hour in John's Gospel is an allusion to the time in which his glory as the Son of God is revealed in his death and resurrection. I'm sorry, I know that's a really theologically heavy and confusing statement. All I can say is, it was theologically heavy and confusing for the disciples too, you're in good company. Throughout his ministry, Jesus frequently said things like "my hour has not yet come," and we know the disciples weren't real clear on what he meant by that. Now that his hour had come, Jesus made one final effort to show the disciples what he meant, by putting his teaching into action. This is the story we read on Maundy Thursday, when Jesus "got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples'

feet.” Peter protested, no, Lord not me. Then yes, Lord all of me. Then on Maundy Thursday we jumped from the foot washing to the part we read this morning, about Jesus’ coming glory and this new command to love.

And let’s just pause here and acknowledge that, yes, those two sentences that started the reading are every bit as confusing as they sound. Let’s read them again, in fact, and count the number of times some form of the word “glorify” is used. “Jesus said, ‘Now the Son of Man has been (1) glorified, and God has been (2) glorified in him. If God has been (3) glorified in him, God will also (4) glorify him in himself and will (5) glorify him at once.’” You track that, that’s five times in two sentences. Oh, and making it even more fun, unlike English, Greek has really clearly defined verb tenses, making it easier in Greek to tell that Jesus is just playing fast and loose with time in these sentences. Past, present, and future, all get smashed together in this approaching of Jesus’ hour.

Let’s talk deep theology here for a moment. Remember how the Gospel of John starts. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” And the Word was with God, and the Word was God. John’s Gospel started by setting us in this indwelling relationship between God and the Word, Jesus and the Father. The prologue then goes on to say that “the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory.” The incarnation, Jesus in the flesh, walking around as human, is the glory, the revelation of God among us. We know God because we can see Jesus, who is the Word, with God and was God.

Now as Jesus' hour is approaching and is here, Jesus is starting to return to where he was at the beginning, with God and was God. The incarnate, enfleshed Jesus was timebound, just as we are time bound. But God is not timebound, God is infinite. I've used this example from C. S. Lewis a ton of times, but I think it's the best one I've seen, so here it is again. Imagine that our human experience is the edge of a ruler. We travel one way along the ruler, in one direction, at one speed, in only one place at a time. Right, that's time, that's how time works. But God, God is the air around the ruler. God is everywhere at once, ahead of us, behind us, and right where we are, always, at the same time. As the incarnation begins to unravel in the time of Jesus' hour, so too does Jesus being bounded to time. Jesus, with God and was God, is becoming what he has always been, the air around the ruler.

It is out of this relationship between Jesus and the Father that this next teaching comes. "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." This "new" commandment is interesting because on first glance, it's not new. Love one another has been a super common theme in Jesus' teachings up to this point, and in fact is a pretty prevalent theme in the Old Testament as well. What are the Ten Commandments but some specifications on how to first love God, and then love one another? Even all the weirdly specific Levitical laws about what to do if your neighbor's ox falls in your ditch or staying away from the community if you have a skin infection is really all about love for the neighbor. Love your neighbor isn't new. What's new is that this love is an expression of the relationship between God and Jesus, a relationship which Jesus is

enacting in his death and resurrection. We love because acts of love are the visible sign, the incarnation, if you will, of this relationship which through Jesus we have been drawn into. Though love we bear witness, to ourselves and to the world, of the love we have experienced in Jesus, the love which God and Jesus share.

And all that is great, but, let's real, what I just said there was a whole lot of theological naval gazing. Here is where the book of Acts is really helpful to us, because Acts shows us what that commandment started to look like when the disciples became apostles and had to start living out these teachings.

The part of Acts we heard this morning is Peter's report back to the church in Jerusalem of an experience he'd just had. Short summary: Peter got invited to the home of a man named Cornelius, who was a devout follower of God and wanted to be baptized. The only problem was Cornelius was a gentile, and there were all sorts of rules around the appropriateness of relationship between Jews and Gentiles. I know Jesus never had a problem with interacting gentiles, but cultural expectations are hard to get over, and so Peter was troubled by what to do. Until God came to him in a dream, with the weird sheet full of unclean food image we heard in the reading, and told Peter, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." Basically, I'm telling you these people are also my children, so they're my children, just like you. What they do, how they live, how they are different from you, doesn't matter, still my children.

Peter's mind is just blown by this. Throughout chapter ten, and even when he's explaining it to the church in Jerusalem in today's reading, you can just about hear the gears clicking into place. From verse twelve, "The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us." Verse seventeen, "If God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?"

Our Acts reading is Peter recounting his experience of once again having his heart and mind expanded as God showed him just how vast God's love is. This was good news for the Gentiles of course, they got to be part of the community. But it was also good news for Peter because seeing Gentiles as part of the community reminded Peter that the love he experienced wasn't earned by him either, it was part of what it meant to be a child of God. It maybe helped Peter, at least for that day, shake off that sense that he had to do enough, be enough, love enough, in order to be loved. Because he didn't, God already did that. As the amazed crowds said in praise, "God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life." To even the Gentiles, to even us, is repentance. So we love each other too, because our acts of love is what God's love looks like in actions. Thanks be to God. Amen.