

For Whom to Live and Die

Today's Gospel reading is part of the Gospel reading which we read on Maundy Thursday. Now the easy way out for preaching a sermon would be to rely on the forgetfulness of the people who heard the sermon from Maundy Thursday and just reuse that sermon. If people would remember that sermon, then the preacher could justify using the same one by saying something like, "Well, the message is so important that it is worth repeating." However, if that is done, then it would be too easy to miss what the Holy Spirit may be trying to tell both the preacher and the listeners. So, the approach that I will be taking today is to try to look at these Gospel verses in light of the last couple of weeks where we heard Peter being commissioned as a shepherd of Jesus' sheep and who is called as a sheep. The theme that is woven through these different Gospel readings is the theme of love.

If you will recall when I spoke of the commissioning of Peter as a shepherd, Jesus asked Peter if Peter loved Him three times; twice using the Greek word 'agape' for love and the last time using 'philia' while Peter used 'philia' all three times. In today's reading, Jesus uses the word 'agape' when talking about the new commandment that Jesus is giving us. If you'll recall, agape love is a self-sacrificing love. Perhaps this is why Peter replied to Jesus in the two verses that follows today's text, "Lord, where are you going?" Jesus answered, "Where I am going, you cannot follow me now; but you will follow afterward." Peter said to him, "Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you." Peter is showing his understanding of what Jesus is talking about when Jesus used agape. Peter said he was willing to die, willing to sacrifice himself for Jesus. Jesus then told Peter that Peter would actually deny knowing Jesus. However, while Peter

understood agape love, he misunderstood for whom he was willing to lay down his life.

Jesus, being divine, needs no one to 'defend' Him, to lay down their life for Jesus. In fact, by willingly going to the cross, Jesus demonstrated that ultimate love for all of humanity by laying down His own life. Having defeated death, Jesus does not need anyone to die for Him. Therefore, Peter misunderstood for whom he should be willing to lay down his life. We find out who that is when Jesus commissions Peter after the Resurrection by the Sea of Galilee, which we heard a couple of weeks ago. Being commissioned as a shepherd of Jesus' flock, Peter is to look out for the sheep, protect them, lead them, feed them while being unselfish in what Peter desires. Being a shepherd, Peter will have to go places and do things which he would not have chosen for himself.

But back to Jesus' command that we are to love one another how He loved us, we see a different kind of relationship than we see between two non-believers. Elsewhere, Jesus tells us that even the Gentiles will love one another and do things for each other, usually with an expectation of reciprocity. Jesus pushed the command to love one another as we would want to be loved by taking out the 'personal gain' that we receive when we love someone the way we want to be loved. To see how Jesus wants us to love the way that He did, we need to look at what Jesus did towards and for others.

Implicit to the saying 'love others that way you want to be loved' is that you can define what love is, what those actions are that demonstrate love. When we push this understanding to the extreme, in essence we are making ourselves out to be a god, someone who 'sets the rules,' someone who knows what is best for others. But then, this would also set up a possible scenario of conflict because what I think should be done by everyone may not be the same as what you think how everyone

should behave. What would happen then is that we would have all these different opinions of what constitutes love and that could be then pushed to the concept that we can have different values of right and wrong. As long as your values doesn't infringe on my values, then we can get along with each other, we can tolerate each other, living in a 'peaceful co-existence.' The problem with this is that our value system of right and wrong may change over time or circumstances so that we can keep whatever power we have or even enlarge that power.

Jesus is telling us on this night before His sacrificial death that we are to love not in a way that looks inwards and basically feeds our own egos, but that we are to look outward to others. Not only are we to look outward to others to see what they need, but we are also to look outwards to see what the real values are, to see what morality is never changing. We do this by emulating Jesus in that He was always looking to the Father, to God for guidance for knowing what the right thing was to do. Jesus was also giving God the 'credit' for everything that Jesus did.

When Jesus interacted with anyone, when anyone came up to Jesus to ask Him to do something for them, Jesus never gave them an application to see if they qualified for His help. He never asked them what their religious affiliation was, how often they went to services, how devout they were in their everyday practices or what their political leanings were. He simply saw someone who was in need who had turned to Him for help. After Jesus helped them, He again did not require them to do anything specific (except maybe the 10 lepers He healed, but even then He only wanted them to do what law said they must do in order to be declared 'clean' to rejoin their communities). He did not require them to follow Him, to support His ministry in some fashion, not even to do something to 'pay it forward.' So, to love one another as Jesus loved us, we are to give of ourselves without

looking for anything in return or requiring anything to show others are 'worthy' of our help.

It is this different kind of love for others and towards one another that will distinguish us from those who are not followers of Jesus. The trap that we need to be careful to not fall into is the trap that we are only to show this kind of love to fellow believers. By reserving this kind of love only for those who are fellow believers would make us into a 'club' where there are certain requirements to join and certain requirements to be able to stay in the club. Jesus never showed any tendency that would indicate that we are to be a closed group, only helping those who are like us. Jesus opened His heart, His love to everyone who turned to Him. We should be like the Good Samaritan and go and do likewise.

YouTube links:

Gospel and sermon: <https://youtu.be/vTDKGM4Ic4>

Service: <https://youtu.be/8de1tbLobUs>