

Homily for the 6th Sunday of Easter

May 8-9, 2021

Readings: Acts 10:25-26, 34-35, 44-48; 1 John 4:7-10; John 15:9-17

Preacher: Marlene Bessette

I am not an English major, but “as” is a very versatile word. Apparently, it can be a conjunction, a preposition, an adverb or a noun. Who knew that “as” is also a type of Roman coin?

In today’s gospel, we see it used in an incredibly significant way when Jesus includes it in the new commandment that he gives to his disciples: “Love one another *as* I love you.” Not only is it the second time during the last supper that Jesus shares this new commandment with his disciples, but this time, He does not leave the understanding of “*as* I love you” up for interpretation. Jesus is very clear... “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

That really raises the bar for loving your fellow disciples. This is a command for a self-sacrificing, no holds barred love. It is no longer sufficient for them to love their neighbor as themselves, now they are being commanded to love *as* Jesus loves us—laying down their lives for their community of fellow disciples. Now *that* is divine love.

These disciples were called into relationship with the same love that exists between the Father and Son and sent to display this love to all the world. And they embraced this commandment as the unconditional, self-sacrificing and welcoming love that Jesus intended. It became the foundation and fuel for the growth of the early Christian communities. And as tradition and history recounts, the apostles and many others did in fact lay their lives down for the faith and their brethren.

In the earliest centuries of the church this divine love was the hallmark of the community of Jesus’ followers. Early Christian authors, contemporary philosophers and historians chronicled how the early Christians loved one another so much that they were ready to die for one another. This genuine love and unity among Christians in the name of the risen Christ was one of the major factors in the spread of Christianity such that it is now the largest religious group on the globe.

But now, after thousands of years of growth, Christianity is declining at a rapid pace in America. According to a 2019 Pew study, 65 percent of American adults describe themselves as Christians, down 12 percentage points over the past decade. Meanwhile, the religiously unaffiliated share of the population, consisting of people who describe their religious identity as atheist, agnostic or “nothing in particular,” now stands at 26 percent, up from 17 percent in 2009.

Why is this happening? Could it be that we drifted too far from the compassionate and visible love for each other that was such a magnet for Christian communities?

The love that Jesus is speaking of is not simply a feeling. Jesus is asking his disciples, asking us, to want *and do* what is best for the other person. The first letter of John makes this very clear: “If someone who has worldly means sees a brother in need and refuses him compassion, how can the love of God remain in him? Children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth.” (1 Jn 3:17-18)

The state of our country and our world today, with its extreme inequities between the haves and the have-nots is not rooted in divine love. Covid has amplified this inequality—where the least advantaged will suffer the most in damaged health, derailed schooling, and wrecked careers. And the inequities within countries are dwarfed by the gaps between countries as is tragically evident in the mounting Covid death tolls in India just this past month.

Now, imagine a world where everyone followed Jesus’ great commandment to love *as* He loves. In our community, there would be no judgment as to whether people are worthy of our love or not, no distrust of the outsider or those who are different, all who are suffering would be welcome. We would feel compelled to help anyone in need and demand equity and justice in our communities. And the good news is that so many people and organizations are doing just that—being moved by the Spirit to recognize injustice and suffering and respond with selfless love. Wouldn’t it be great if we all did that? If we all let the Holy Spirit move in us and strive to love as Jesus wants us to love, then we really would see His kingdom come on earth *as* it is in heaven.