

**Sermon: 2019/05/19 (5th Sunday of Easter Day) - Acts 11:1-18;
Psalm 148; Revelation 21:1-6; & John 13:31-35_BTR**

[Invite children to the front.]

Jesus spent nearly *all* His time preaching, teaching and healing the Jews.
Not Englishmen.
Not Americans.
But people who looked like Him and spoke His language.

Consequently, after His return to Heaven, there was a *lot* of confusion as to whether there could be non-Jewish people - people like us - in the Church.

Peter, one of Jesus *closest* friends, didn't think so. He thought that people like him shouldn't mix with different colored people from other countries.

Then, one night, he was given a vision by God.
In his dream - which happened *three* times (in a row) - he saw in the sky a bedsheet full of every type of animal on earth - like Noah's Ark.
Animals like... [throw soft-toys onto a bedsheet, listing their species as you do so]
Suddenly, it began descending toward him, and he heard a voice from Heaven, saying: "Eat, Peter."

It was a sign!
A sign pointing us toward the truth that diversity in the world is a good thing - God *made* the world this way.
And we should enjoy the differences we discover around us.

Let's pray: Father God, ..., in Jesus' name, amen.

[Ask children to leave.]

God loves everyone;
God loves 'the world'. [Jn. 3:16]
God *is* love: [1 Jn. 4:8].
And we know all these things are true because they are embodied - *demonstrated* - *proved* - by Jesus Christ, particularly on "the Cross."
And now we, His *disciples* - are "passed the baton."
Yes? Like in a relay race:
the first runner does their "bit," exerting themselves to cover a significant portion

of the allotted distance, but when they come to a stop it isn't at *the* finish line - no, that is still a ways off; instead, they hand a piece of white, plastic tubing to another runner who must then carry it further.

And that's us.

We're in a 'race' - that's Saint Paul's word: he uses it *three* times in his letters: [1 Cor. 9:24, 2 Tim. 4:7 & Heb. 12:1].

A race to show Creation around us the love of God:

'By this everyone will know', Jesus says: [Jn. 13:35].

And that's great, right?

Who doesn't want to know that they are loved?

Like when you were at school:

it's fantastic - *and nerve-shredding(!)* - getting those sealed, mysterious, usually pink envelopes on Valentine's Day: the bigger the pile was the more exaggerated your strut around the halls; the spring in your step made you feel like an NBA super-star - like you could slam-dunk any hoop - even one as high as the Empire State building.

Everyone *loves* to be *loved*.

And that's what we're about - or at least that's supposed to be what we're about: this is the point that Jesus was trying to *impress* on us this morning.

It will *define* us.

Or sink us - the Church.

We've got to get it right.

And that part *isn't* obvious:

for, I ask, what *is* it to *love*?

That is a contentious debate.

A live one right now.

What does it mean, *exactly*?

To *really* love a person; our neighbors; our spouse; the boss; the tax-man?

(- Now there's a scary thought!)

The other day, I began watching an actual debate - about love - among other things - broadcast from London, of two famous *English* authors - Douglas Murray and Sir Roger Scruton.

Scruton is a philosopher - he's written *fifty* books - but he's not one, I confess, that I was especially familiar with, *until* I heard, on the radio, just the other day, that he had been appointed *and then sacked* from a government advisory body within a matter of days.

(A *matter of days*!)

It was a *big* news story back home:

some journalist from a magazine called, *The New Statesman*, interviewed and then *deliberately* misquoted Scruton on Twitter and "all Hell broke loose."

Anyway, the interview I watched - on Youtube - was fascinating: [n.1].

Murray observed (aloud) to Scruton - who nodded his head - something that I think many of us sense, which is that 'harmlessness has been elevated into the greatest virtue that anyone should seek to attain.'

That everyone should mind their own business.

And if the person-next-door or down-the-street is making terrible, short-sighted decisions and their life is going to hell-in-a-hand-cart, that's their *freedom*; that's their *right* - and it's not for me, *as an individual citizen*, to interfere; not to offer advice or a helping hand, but, if anyone, maybe the government?

Everyone just stay in your own lane:

This is my truth.

That's your truth.

But this "*subjectivism*" is nonsense!

Jesus is the truth.

And the way.

And the life!

And to *love* someone *is* to intervene in some way - to encroach; to invade upon their "sphere," though doing such contains, yes, like a vehicle a passenger, an implicit criticism.

Jesus was '*sent*' to intervene: That's John's first epistle, chapter 4, verse 9.

And we are to do the same.

We heard that *very* thing just last week in our readings:

Jesus, *resurrected*, appeared in the locked room with the Apostles and said, "Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, *so I send you.*" [Jn. 20:21]

Love, then, is the opposite of "anything goes."

It binds and soothes, and it admonishes and reprimands too.

God is love and God is *a father*. *The father*.

To love like God, then, is to love as a father - *a parent* - loves.

So, this week, the internet was "a buzz" with the tragic passing of a high-profile Episcopalian, Rachel Held Evans.

Our presiding bishop even tweeted his condolences to her family.

She was a blogger, and one that had made criticising the church she grew up in - a conservative, traditionalist, non-denominationalist church - for being too critical.

The irony, right?

But her heart was absolutely in the right place: her concern was that people - broken, sinful, *vulnerable* people - lost without shepherd [see: Mt. 9:36] - people in need of love - the love of God *in action* through His people - felt excluded from experiencing it; from being *transformed* by it.

And that won't do!

It won't.

Because there is a fine, delicate balance to be struck.

And, with that "balance" in mind, I want to "close" with a quotation from another blogger, Anne Kennedy.

She writes: 'I left the Episcopal church - probably as Rachel was entering it - for this reason: it looks inviting to say that everyone is welcome as they are, no questions asked, but it is actually cruel. In so far as inviting someone in out of a snowstorm, but then opening all the windows and doors, so that the furious icy snow comes in with them, is cruel.'

Let's take a moment to reflect on the meaning of love.

Footnotes:

1. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q9IVFhhlyvE&t=2207s>