

## fJohn 14:15-21

This week, we get another great reading from the Gospel of John. In fact, throughout the Lenten and Easter seasons this year, we've spent quite a bit of time in the Gospel of John, so much so, that the Tuesday Bible study recently called me out on it. I told them at the beginning of this lectionary cycle, Year A, that we would be focused mostly on the Gospel of Matthew. For a year supposedly dedicated to Matthew, they said, we sure are spending a lot of time on John's Gospel. Don't worry, we'll get to Matthew's Gospel later in the year. But for now, I've enjoyed our little detour through John.

John's Gospel is a little different than the other three, more focused on theme and less focused on timeline and chronology details. John isn't afraid to play with the narrative and the details of the story, so long as you come away from it with the main point more clearly understood. John wants you to know, without a doubt, the Jesus is the Messiah, that he came to teach and heal and help us, and that he died for our sins so that we can really, truly, fully live and be in perfect relationship with God again. This is, of course, the overarching message of all the Gospels, John just chooses to convey the message in a way that differs slightly from the narrative arch of the others.

One of the themes that John comes back to repeatedly in his Gospel is the centrality of God's love. John writes about the love of God more than any other Gospel. In John 13, at the Last Supper, Jesus tells his disciples to love each other as he has loved them, a tall order, but an essential commandment. The world will know we belong to Christ, Jesus says, if we know how to love each other well. Just two chapters later, chapter 15, Jesus will tell his disciples again that they are to love others. He doesn't just ask them to love, he commands it. Right before he is

about to be arrested and killed, Jesus reminds his disciples that love is the reason he's doing it. And, of course, the most famous passage in all of scripture, the one Bible drill even Episcopalians can typically ace, John 3:16: For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

John comes back to love, over and over again, for the reason of all of this. It's the reason we exist, that God, who is perfect, complete love, just wanted other beings to share that love with. We were created in love, made for feeling and sharing love, not just with God, but with each other. Love is the reason God wouldn't leave us alone to face the weight of our sins and bad decisions. Love is the reason God would deign to die. Love is the reason God rose from the grave. Love is the reason God wants to spend an eternity with us, just being near us. It all comes back to love, God's enduring, all-encompassing, unwavering love for us.

Today's Gospel reading from John, unsurprisingly, brings us back to love. Jesus tells his disciples that if they love him, they will keep his commandments. Jesus has come to earth to do the will of God, to lovingly teach us and heal us, and to ultimate die for us and for our sins. Those who seek to participate in that love, to keep spreading that love, will necessarily be about continuing that work of love in the world. Put another way, we will know that we are fully situating ourselves in the love of God found in Jesus Christ when we see the loving works of Jesus being manifested in the world through our lives.

I preached about God's love a few weeks ago, too. When we're dealing this much with the Gospel of John, the topic of love is bound to come up quite a bit in our preaching. One of the things I've been thinking about since that sermon is how we define love for ourselves. One of the great gifts of our lives, one of the greatest gifts God has built into the fabric of creation, is the

ability to love and be loved. By the grace of God, I suspect each of us knows what it feels like to both share and receive love. Each moment of love in our lives paints a richer, fuller picture for us of what God's perfect love is like. By building our lives around love, by choosing to make love the foundation of the things we do and share, as Jesus commands us to do, we are pointed ever more closely to the love of God, present in and through and around us always. As I think about the kind of love I want to share, the kind of love God calls us to share, I think about the people and things in my life that have shown me what real, true, deep love is, the people and things in my life who have taught me how to love.

The great truth about love is that it is inherently meant to be shared. Love is an external force, one that needs an object, a place, an experience, a person on which to be placed. I think about all the many people in my life who I have been blessed to love and be loved by, people like my family and friends, congregations I have served, people I've been in school or at work with. As we prep for Special Session later this month, I think about the campers who come, people living life with physical and cognitive disabilities, people who know how to love really well, and who have taught me how to do the same, people who are so quick with a hug and an "I love you." Yes, there are so many people in my life who have taught me what it means to love. People who have helped shaped me, who have encouraged and challenged me, who have laughed and wept and celebrated and grieved with me. People who have loved me even when I did not feel particularly lovely. People who have helped me build my life around love, who have pointed me, by their own gift of love, ever more closely to the gift and presence of God's divine love that colors and suffuses everything in creation.

I very much hope that you have people in your own life who have taught you more about what it means to give and receive love. Those people have shared the gift of love with you, have taught you how to love, and have helped define for you a little more fully about what God's love for us is like. This is the kind of work Jesus calls his disciples to throughout time, people who are steeped in love and who choose to share that love with other people. We cannot keep love to ourselves. Love is useless if we do, and it deprives the world of a much-needed gift. Jesus tells those first few disciples that, once he's gone, they still have work to do, still have lives to change, still have love to share. They can't have a brush with God's holy love, and then just go back to the way things were. They have to take up the mantle of that love, and keep sharing it, keep spreading it, keep telling a world that is so often mired in darkness that the light of God's love exists, that it is real, and that it changes everything.

Jesus told his first few followers that those who love him will keep his commandment. Those who understand how much God loves the world, how much God loves them, will be about sharing that love, bringing through love joy, healing, and wholeness in a broken world. We find ourselves now with the same commandment from Jesus. Loving God means continuing the loving work of Jesus. We know what love feels like. We know how love has changed our lives, enhanced them, made them more wonderful, and it is nothing short of our God-given calling to keep sharing that love with other people.

I remain perpetually grateful for the people in my life who have taught me what love can and should be like, so that I can then share that love with others. Each bit of love we receive, each bit of love we share allows us to more fully participate in and understand the divine love of God. God, who is love, who loves us so much, calls us to share the love that we have been given,

by the wonderful people in our lives and, even more importantly, by God. Jesus reminds us that, if we want to be followers of Christ, we have to be about spreading that gift of love to others.