

**The Fifth Sunday of Easter**  
(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Acts 14:21-27
<i>Response</i>	I will praise your name for ever, my king and my God.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 145:8-9, 10-11, 12-13
<i>Second Reading</i>	Revelation 21:1-5A
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	I give you a new commandment, says the Lord: love one another as I have loved you.
<i>Gospel</i>	John 13:31-33A; 34-35

The 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter for Year C continues our journey through the Gospel of John and the sayings of Jesus to his disciples in that gospel. Here we move into some of the sayings of Jesus to his disciples at the Last Supper. You might recall that in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, although they record the words of institution, they don't record the teachings of Jesus to his disciples on that last night. That is something that's unique to John's gospel, where he has multiple chapters (13, 14, 15, 16 and 17), several long chapters detailing Jesus' final words, his discourses to the disciples on the night before he died. So on the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter, we're looking at one section from that Last Supper discourse (as it's referred to) in the Gospel of John that's focused on the New Commandment. So, think about the synoptic gospels, where Jesus institutes the new covenant (in the words of institution). He doesn't just do a new covenant with them through the Eucharist (through the Last Supper), he also gives them a new commandment, and that's the gospel reading for today. So if we turn to John 13:31 and following, we'll look at what Jesus says to his disciples during the Last Supper, and try to unpack it.

When he [Judas] had gone out, Jesus said, "Now is the Son of man glorified, and in him God is glorified; if God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once. Little children, yet a little while I am with you...A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By

this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."<sup>1</sup>

Okay, that's a very famous passage. It's the so-called "new commandment" or "the new commandment of love", and it's only given to us here in the Gospel of John, and it's something that is very significant and needs to be interpreted. So a few points I want to make about it. First, remember the context. The context in which Jesus gives to his disciples the New Commandment (to love one another) is the Last Supper. So everything he's saying here is taking place (if you want to imagine it) in the setting of the Last Supper. Jesus has instituted the Eucharist (or he has at least begun the meal) because it says "Judas went out into the dark and it was night", and he now reveals this new commandment to the disciples. And in that context, he's talking about his future passion, death, resurrection and ascension. And you'll see here he uses the language of glorification to describe that. That's one of those technical terms that Jesus uses in the Gospel of John where the word means more than just what it denotes. So, "to glorify" means "to give glory to". But when Jesus speaks about being glorified by the Father or glorifying the Father in the Gospel of John, it's a reference to the glorification that he will undergo in his passion, his death and his resurrection (and also, actually, his ascension into heaven as well). All of these fulfill his mission and are his (so-to-speak) "glorification". So what he's doing is he's warning the apostles, he's letting them know that he is going to be glorified soon. He is going to undergo his passion, death, and resurrection. He's only going to be with them for a little while. And sure enough, it's just going to basically be for the rest of the night (he'll be arrested that evening, when they'll be taken into custody) and by Friday afternoon, he will be dead on the cross.

So, you see the imagery here of him addressing the disciples as little children, which is kind of an interesting image too because they're all full-grown men. And there are lots of different ways you could explain that. On the one hand, because Jesus is both fully human and fully God, because he is both "the one who is sent", but he's also "one with the Father", there's a real sense in which to him all human beings are little children. But there's another dimension of it that I think is interesting, which is that in the context of the Last Supper (which was a Jewish Passover

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

meal, not just in the synoptics but also in John; I cover that in my book *Jesus and The Last Supper*). The ordinary celebration of a Jewish Passover meal would be led by a father. The father of the household would lead the meal (or the grandfather if it's an extended family). It would be a paternal figure who would lead the meal, who would act as host, and then his children would gather around the table. So in the context of the Passover meal and the Last Supper, it's significant that although Jesus in his relationship to God the Father is the Son, within the context of the Passover, he takes the role of father of this new family (so-to-speak) that he's establishing through the Last Supper and in the body of his disciples who have gathered with him.

And so, when he says “Little children, I'm with you for a little while – a new commandment I give you, that you love one another as I have loved you”. Now, this is rather striking (again, in a 1<sup>st</sup> Century Jewish context) because in the Old Testament it's God who gives commandments. Think about the Ten Commandments, the Decalogue in Exodus 20. Although the commandments are given through Moses, they're ultimately given by God to the people of Israel. So, if I told you, “Oh, there's not just 10 commandments now, there's an 11<sup>th</sup> commandment. I added it. Here, I'm going to give you an 11<sup>th</sup> commandment.” You'd probably react by saying, “Woah, well who are you to give me an 11<sup>th</sup> commandment? It's God's prerogative to give commandments to his people.” So we kind of see (once again) an implicit divine identity by Jesus' implicit, divine authority, that he's claiming to add a commandment to the list of commandments that they already know. Although of course, when you look at it, it isn't an additional commandment, really, it's just a (kind of) distillation of all of the commandments (in the Old Testament). The two tablets (The Decalogue) are really about loving God, the first three commandments are “how to love God”, and then the 2<sup>nd</sup> set (7 commandments) are about “love of neighbor”.

So here, Jesus builds on that, but he says, “Love one another as I have loved you, so should you love one another”. So the Greek word here for love (I've talked about this on other occasions) is *agaapao* (that's the verb), or *agape* (that's the noun). And of course, it's unfortunate that in English, our word “love” has so many different connotations and denotations, and the most common denotation of love (that we would use today) would be romantic love. If I “fall in love with someone” it means that I have a romantic relationship with them. Or, we can even say “I love ice cream.” What we mean is, “I enjoy it. It's a good food. I think it tastes good. I prefer it.” So love has really been stretched thin as a word in the English language

(it's almost like silly putty, if you pull it further and further apart it starts to sag because it loses the force of the meaning). And in this case, in Greek (especially in this context), *agape* (or *agapao* here), Jesus is definitely intending it not as romantic love here, but we might call "sacrificial love", the kind of love that wills the good of another person, even unto suffering and death itself. And you can see that that's what Jesus means by *agape* ("love", in the Gospel of John) by looking at John 15. Just a few verses later in the Last Supper discourse, Jesus says (in John 15:13)

Greater love (*agape*) has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.

So for Jesus, sacrificial *agape* is the supreme expression of love. It's the highest form of love to lay down your life for another person. It's certainly the highest form of love of neighbor. And so, that's the essence, that's the heart of the New Commandment that Jesus is giving to his apostles. "I want you to love one another as I have loved you." In other words, "I want you to love one another sacrificially." To be able, not just able, but willing to lay down your lives for one another. And this, he ends by saying, "this is how people will know that you are my disciples. That you *agapao* one another." That you have that kind of love for one another, a sacrificial love for one another. And I think it's important to remember here that when Jesus says "disciples", the Greek word for disciple, *mathetes*, is from the word *manthano*, the verb means "to learn". So literally, "my learners". How will people know that you are my learners? How will people know that you are my students? When they see you imitate the teacher, when they see you imitate the master and love one another as I have loved you (sacrificially), that's how they'll know that you're my disciples.

The little song we learned (at least I learned, when I was a kid), "they will know we are Christians by our love". That's a good song. It's a true statement, but Jesus doesn't say Christians here. Notice what he says, my disciples. First of all, the term "Christian" hadn't been coined yet, but more importantly, Jesus isn't just calling the disciples to be believers in him (that's really important), he's calling him to be his students. So they are supposed to study what the master says, to listen to what the master teaches, and to do what the master does. They are called to imitate him and to live like he lived. I think this is important for us (once again) in a contemporary context because sometimes we will talk about discipleship and reduce it to being a believer. I mean think how often it is today people will say, "Are you a be-

liever? Do you believe in Jesus?” What they mean is, “Have you made an intellectual act of accepting who Jesus is and what he’s done for you. Do you believe that those things are true?” And that’s really important, the consent of the intellect is important.

But, being a disciple is much more than just believing. Because you can believe and not do anything he said. You can believe that he’s Divine, you can believe that he’s the son of God, and disobey him or abandon him or betray him, and all those things. So a true disciple (what Jesus is saying)... “the way people will know if you’re really my students is if you love like the master loved, if you love like the teacher loved, if you imitate the teacher.” And this is how the teacher/student relationship was in 1<sup>st</sup> Century Judaism. When you took up with a rabbi or when you studied under a rabbi, it was never just assumed that you would learn his ideas and make his ideas your ideas, but that you would walk with him in the way that he walked. You would follow the path that he led. And that’s a lot harder than just assenting to intellectual propositions, to intellectual abstract ideas. Those are important, some teachers may or may not teach the truth, but there’s more than just the truth involved here. It’s an act not just of the intellect (that’s how we know), but Jesus is saying here “I want you to make an act of the will, that you love.” So we know with the intellect but we choose with the will. So we know with the mind but we love with the heart (with the will), the deepest part of the person, where a person chooses for or against God.

Another reason it’s significant is because if you think about the angelic intellect. So in scriptures, you see the unholy angels (like Satan). Well they know the truth, their intellects grasp the truth, but their will’s reject it. So you can know all the truth in the world and still be damned if you don’t love, if you don’t make an act of the will to choose the good for another. So Jesus here is giving a commandment and it isn’t just like an addendum, it’s essential. If we don’t love one another as he loved us, we’re not really his disciples. That’s the flip-side of this new commandment. The expression of love within the church becomes a fundamental (kind of) litmus test for the authenticity of the discipleship, not just believing in Jesus, but loving like Jesus loved and living like Jesus lived.

And nowhere do we see that love more clearly enacted than in the Acts of the Apostles. Nice segue, huh? See how I went from one to the other there? If you go back to the 1<sup>st</sup> reading for today, we continue our journey through the spread of the gospel, through the early decades of the Christian church, through the early

decades of the apostolic community. And the church presents to us now another account of Paul's missionary activity, and this is the account of Paul's return to the Church in Antioch. So in chapter 14:21-27

When they [Paul and Barnabas] had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Ico'nium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they believed. Then they passed through Pisid'ia, and came to Pamphyl'ia. And when they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attali'a; and from there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work which they had fulfilled. And when they arrived, they gathered the church together and declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.

Alright, so why is the Church giving us this picture of the early activity of the apostle Paul? Well, remember, the Church's very mission is to evangelize. That's why she exists at all. And so we see in the gospel reading today, Jesus talking about authentic discipleship encountering love of neighbor. Well the supreme expression of love of neighbor is to bring salvation to them, to bring the life and the love of the gospel to the world. And so the early apostles are driven by this love of neighbor to bring the gospel out to the Gentiles. And here, Paul is kind of giving us a model of what evangelization looks like. I think this is actually important for us in our day and time because in the last decades of the church (last forty years or so), a number of popes have been speaking about the new evangelization. John Paul II arguably coined that term and kind of brought that to the forefront (although Pope Paul VI had a whole document on evangelization in the modern world, a very important encyclical on that). A lot more discussion is taking place in Catholic circles about "What does evangelization look like?" What do we mean by the new evangelization? Well one good way to look at what evangelization should look like (in the new evangelization) is to look at what it looked like (that's a lot of "looks") in the old evangelization, namely the apostolic (the initial evangelization of the world by the apostles). And what we see here is a couple of key points.

First, notice, when Paul goes and he preaches the gospel from city-to-city, he doesn't just (this is important) make believers, but it says here "he made many dis-

ciples”. Now we saw this word in the gospel for today, and what does it mean? It means students. In other words, people don’t just begin to believe in Jesus, but they take instruction and they learn to imitate the master. They become students of the teachings of Jesus and of the teachings of the apostles. It is very important for us to remember in our day and time, that if we’re going to share the good news with people, we also have to be willing to be committed to teaching them. There’s an intellectual component, not just an emotional or spiritual component to the gospel, there’s an intellectual component. We’re called to make disciples, to make students of the nation. Students of whom? Of Jesus Christ and of his teaching.

Second, after evangelizing them, bringing the good news and making them disciples, which would also take place through baptism (obviously) — if you think about Jesus’ commandment (the great commission), “go into many nations, make disciples, and baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” So once they’ve been brought in to the Church through faith and baptism, it’s also important that they be strengthened or encouraged in their life of faith. So it says here that Paul was “strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith.” So what does that mean? There’s a lot here. Notice, it isn’t just that he’s exhorting them to continue in their faith (like, my faith, your faith, his faith, her faith), but in “the” faith. The objective truth that is given by the apostles to the nations. So again, the new evangelization, whenever we evangelize, we’re not bringing our ideas and our opinions and sharing them with others. That’s not what evangelization’s about. Evangelization is about making disciples of Jesus Christ and then handing on “the faith”. The objective content of the truth that Jesus gave to the apostles and then the apostles gave to the Church.

And this has always been seen (in a sense, summarized) above all, by the Apostles Creed. Ever since earliest times, the creed has been a kind of summary of the essential articles of faith, this objective summary of the contents of the faith that is handed on from generation to generation to generation. The creed is not like Peter’s opinions or Paul’s opinions, it’s the faith. And then finally (and this is important), the role of suffering in the life of discipleship. If you want to be a Christian to escape suffering, you should join some other religion because this is not how this one works. Look at Paul’s message. This is a great selling point if you want to sell the gospel: through many tribulations we must enter the Kingdom of God. So how do I enter the kingdom? I want to be in the kingdom. People say, “I want to go to heaven.” Good. Alright, then be prepared to suffer, because you’re being brought into the mystical body of the crucified one, the pierced one. The mystical

body of Christ who (yes, he was raised, but he) suffered and died first. So we're not going to escape it ourselves.

This is important too. There can be a real temptation in evangelization to sell the gospel by putting on rose colored glasses, by just accentuating the good elements of it or (in a sense that) the pleasant elements like the joy, the peace, the love, the understanding. Joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, understanding, all the fruits of the spirit; those are all wonderful things. And they're part of the gospel. And you receive the virtues of faith, hope and love in baptism. That's all true. But we've got to be careful that when we evangelize, when we share the gospel, we don't leave out the essential role that suffering plays in it. One reason it can be tempting to leave this out is because suffering is not attractive. The cross is not attractive. And even less attractive is not just the cross of Jesus, but me having to pick up the cross, and me having to suffer in order to enter into the kingdom. And so you'll notice that Paul doesn't mince words in this regard, he doesn't soft pedal the gospel. He's very clear about the utterly essential character of suffering as a prerequisite for entering into the resurrection. There is no resurrection without the cross; period. And so he exhorts them to continue in the faith and reminds them that through many tribulations they must enter into the kingdom of God.

So that's the authentic gospel: preaching the good news, making disciples, exhorting people to persevere in the objective faith and also always having the cross as a part of the good news. That's all there. But that's not it, because notice what else is going on here, and this is really crucial for us today. What does the Church look like in terms of its organizational structure? In contemporary times a lot of people will say, "I'm spiritual, but not religious." And what they mean by that is "well, I believe (I might believe in Jesus or believe in God), but I don't obey. I don't follow the rules of any particular church." Usually it means "I believe in God or I believe in Jesus, but I don't go to Church on Sunday, I'm not a member of any particular organization." And so when you encounter that (it's kind of a remarkably wide spread view), hold it up against the light of the Acts of the Apostles. Is that the church of the Acts of the Apostles? Is the church of Acts a bunch of self-appointed apostles making their own churches, setting up little, local congregations without any authority or individuals having authority over themselves and just believing and not being disciples? No. Not at all.

If you look here, it says that when Paul and Barnabas go to a church, once they've evangelized the particular locale, they don't just take a hike and leave people to

their own whims, to kind of teach themselves, but Acts says they appointed elders for every church with prayer and fasting and committed them to the Lord in whom they believed. So the Greek word here for elders, *presbuteroi*, from the Greek word *presbyterous*, which literally means “elder” – no mysteries here — is the Greek word from which we get the English word “priest” actually. The English word is rooted in this Greek term *presbyter*. And elders, in a 1<sup>st</sup> Century Jewish context, were appointed leaders within the synagogue (or within the temple), who had authority (usually as teachers) over the community. So Paul (this is so crucial) is setting up an apostolic community, which he, as one who is sent by Christ, has the authority not just to found (through evangelization), but also to organize according to a hierarchy in which he ordains *presbyters* to be the official leaders and teachers of “the” faith, the objective faith to the congregation.

This stands in striking contrast to many Christian communities outside the Catholic Church (many ecclesial communities), where the leaders of these communities are either self-appointed or appointed by the congregation without any hierarchy of authority above them that goes back to the apostles. In the Catholic Church, we believe in apostolic succession that is rooted in New Testament texts like this passage from the Acts of the Apostles. That when the apostolic church went around founding churches, they were in communion with the apostles and they had an ordained hierarchy of *presbyters*, which to this day, if you look at documents on the priesthood in the Catholic Church, usually (not every single time) the word for priest is *presbuteros*. It’s *presbyter*, it’s a loaned word in Latin from the Greek term for an elder. Which is kind of funny because I’ve taught at seminary for years and some of the guys who get ordained, they’re in their twenties and they’re not old like an elder, but they’ve entered into the office of an elder after a period of training and formation. And that’s how the early church did it as well. And then finally, in closing, notice what is Paul celebrating here? That the door of faith is open to the Gentiles. So we see this gradual broadening out of the Good News, not just to the synagogue, not just to the Jewish people, but also to the Gentiles, to the nations of the world.

In closing, I’d just like to end with two quotations from the living tradition of the Church, from the early Church Fathers. Again, I’ve been favoring the Doctors of the Church. These are ancient Church Fathers who were chosen as special representatives of the tradition, as teachers (that’s what “doctor” means), the teachers of the faith. Although we think of a doctor as a medical doctor, in Latin and in antiquity, a doctor, meant first and foremost, someone who teaches. One of my kids

once said that, “my daddy is a doctor but not the kind that helps people”, meaning I’m a professor. But in ancient times, doctors did help people, but you help people by giving them the truth. In any case, two Doctors of the Church: Cyril of Alexandria and St. John Chrysostom, this is what they have to say about the greatest commandment. I’ll leave this with you to reflect on. St. Cyril said:

He [Jesus] plainly indicates the novelty involved in his command here—and the extent to which the love he enjoins here surpasses the old idea of mutual love [cf. Deut 6:5]—*by adding the words “Even as I have loved you, you also should love one another...”* The law of Moses mandated the necessity of loving our brothers as ourselves, yet our Lord Jesus the Christ loved us far more than he loved himself. Otherwise, he would have never... undergone for our sake the exceptional bitterness of his death in the flesh... It was indeed something new for love to go as far as that! Christ commands us to love as he did, pursuing neither reputation, wealth or anything else before love of our brothers and sisters. *If need be, we even need to be prepared to face death for our neighbor’s salvation as our Savior’s blessed disciples did, as well as those who followed in their footsteps.* To them the salvation of others mattered more than their own lives, and they were ready to do anything or suffer anything to save souls that were perishing.<sup>2</sup>

And then from St. John Chrysostom, he said this (he’s talking about the love commandment, but he says):

Passing over the miracles that they [the disciples] were to perform, he [Jesus] makes love the distinguishing mark of his followers.... *Miracles do not attract unbelievers as much as the way you live your life.* And nothing brings about a proper life as much as love.<sup>3</sup>

Isn’t that interesting. So Jesus did not say, “The way they will know you are my disciples is by your miracles, by the miracles you perform.” What he said was, “the way they will know you are my students is by your love.” So love is the essential characteristic of the authentic disciple. And as Chrysostom is saying here, at the end of the day, love attracts unbelievers far more powerfully even than miracles do. I think that maybe that’s because you can always start doubting about a miracle.

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<sup>2</sup> Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 9; trans. in Elowsky, ACCS, p. 114

<sup>3</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, 72.5; trans. NPNF

You can second guess it. “Did that really happen?” The mind can play all kinds of tricks on itself. But there’s a real power to the reality of having been loved, especially having been loved sacrificially. No one can deny that one of the martyrs who laid down their lives for the sake of the gospel, didn’t actually love the people they were dying for. There’s no denying that. There’s no debating that. And so what we see here is, St. Cyril of Alexandria is saying, not only is the supreme expression of sacrificial love being willing to die for someone else, but the highest expression is being willing to die for the salvation of someone else, making someone else’s eternal salvation more important to you than your own natural life is. That is everywhere on display in, not just the lives of the apostles, the vast majority of whom were martyred, but in the life of all missionaries, any missionary who’s ever given up their life for the sake of the gospel, and who has ever died for the salvation of another person’s soul. In their lives and in their witness you see what true discipleship really looks like.