

Sermon Proper 18 A

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St. John the Evangelist, Jamaica Plain

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Once when I was teaching World Religions, a student announced that he thought that Christianity was very easy. Now, because he was an older man and a Christian and had been at it for a long time, I was surprised that he thought Christianity was so easy since I often find it quite challenging. But, when I inquired further why he thought our religion was so easy he said: “Well, we don’t have kosher requirements like the Jews do and we don’t have to fast for a month like the Muslims do and we don’t have to go on pilgrimage to Mecca, either.” Actually, I love to travel to holy places and go on spiritual journeys so I wouldn’t mind at all being **required** to do so by my religion! But, I got his point. Looked at from certain angles Christianity can seem very

undemanding. Until, of course, you actually look it straight in the face!

Today's readings give us a good opportunity to look at Christianity straight on. Paul, who was a well-educated rabbi and knew Torah very well says something quite significant today. Loving one another fulfills the law. The whole law. All the commandments. Now, "loving your neighbor as yourself" is found in Leviticus. It didn't start with Jesus and his movement. But to say that loving your neighbor fulfills the whole law is a very strong statement. So that sounds simple, right? All we have to do is love others and all our religious requirements will be met. But, if you think that loving other people like yourself is easy, then you haven't been doing it very long or been doing it very well or you don't have many other people in your life! Because it is hard. And challenging. And constant. And, Jesus raised the bar for us by telling his followers to love others as he has loved us. To the point of death. To the last outpouring of himself. **So, now I want that**

**man back in my class to tell him that Christianity is not easy,
after all!**

Christianity is not a collection of ethical principles. It is not a moral check-off list which we can keep on the refrigerator and consult from time to time! It is not a solitary enterprise which we can engage in in the privacy of our own home. No. Christianity requires Jesus and requires a group of people. Because what Jesus is proposing is a whole new way of being in relationship with God and with one another. It is a whole vision of a healed and reconciled people who live in a new way with one another and with their neighbors and with the whole creation. Who love as he loves. Who owe one another only love.

And this love means that we do no harm to our neighbor. That sounds innocent enough. Perhaps “neighbor” means to you the Johnson family who lived next door when you were growing up. Or the nice guy at work who has lunch with you occasionally. But, as we know, that is not all what Jesus means by “neighbor” When someone tried to get Jesus to define “neighbor” he told them

a story. A famous one. The story of the Good Samaritan. This term is really benign now because we have tamed it. But, when Jesus used the story of the Good Samaritan to define the word “neighbor” it was actually shocking to his listeners. Jesus made the hero of the story someone who was considered a heretic. Someone with whom the Jews disagreed theologically. That’s bad enough. But, the Samaritans were also political enemies of the Jews. So, Jesus is saying that your neighbor to whom you owe your love is someone whom you feel justified in hating for religious and for political reasons. Perhaps substituting “Taliban” for “Samaritan” will give you a better sense of what Jesus meant by neighbor.

And in today’s gospel we hear about how to exercise love in the midst of conflict. Whenever a group of people gets together there will be disagreement. Sometimes this escalates. Sometimes people violate the norms of the community or break the law or stray from the fold. In our “lawsuit-heavy” world it is refreshing to hear about another way to lead the errant back to the path. Talk to them. Privately. With love. Then if that doesn’t work bring a few

witnesses to talk with them. Privately. With love. And then bring the matter to the whole church. Imagine if we lived like this! Confronting a problem of behavior instead of shutting our eyes tightly and pretending it isn't there. Or leaving one person to deal with the conflict while everyone else melts into the woodwork. Or, even worse, ignoring the problem until it has become so huge that it explodes in everybody's face. No, Jesus proposes an alternative way of staying in community while holding our brothers and sisters responsible for their behavior and for the health of the whole group.

This is hard. How can we live like this? Let's be clear. We are not being set up to fail. We are not being invited to some kind of heroic exercise of virtue which is more than most of us can do on our own. We are not being asked to try really **really** hard and to be earnest about our virtue as though we were hanging on by our fingernails or "white-knuckling" our way through life! Instead, we are being invited to live a new and resurrected life. We have been baptized into the death and into the resurrection of Christ. And

Christ is already risen from the dead. So we are living with one foot in one world and one in another- the world here and now and the world to come. As the scripture says: “If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation, the old has passed away, the new has come.” We are living the resurrected life of Christ right here and right now.

The theological term for this is “realized eschatology.” But, although it has a name we may not know, it is an experience we have all had. We have all forgiven someone who has offended us. We have all welcomed a stranger. We have been reconciled with a former enemy. We have all loved someone difficult to love. We have all extended hospitality to people not welcome elsewhere. We have all felt the deep joy of being forgiven. We have all received the grace to change our lives and mend our ways. We have all seen the world afresh through God’s compassionate eyes. We have all had glimpses of resurrection, slivers of Easter sunshine have come into our shut-down lives unexpectedly and filled us with peace!

But it is not easy to live continually, day after day, as a “new creation.” We need to keep at it. We need to be in community and

in worship- confessing our sins, receiving God's forgiveness, listening to God's word, sharing Christ's feast around this altar week after week and learning from one another, constantly starting anew in the power of the Holy Spirit As you start a new year together at St. John's it might be a good time to commit yourselves again to being a new creation together. Being a resurrection community here and now!

Actually, the church is like a laboratory where we try out together this resurrected life – this life of living together in love- before we take our show on the road! We work out the kinks here in community. And then the example that we give of new relationships, of being brothers and sisters in the Risen Christ, is the message we bring to the world. And when we do, people will be intrigued by how we live together. Will be surprised and pleased and encouraged by our life as a Christian community. Will find our life attractive and appealing. Something they might like to join and try for themselves.

But, as the scriptures tell us we do not have limitless time to do this. There is an urgency in today's scriptures about creating this community with God's Holy Spirit while we have the time because "the night is far gone and the day is drawing near." Can you commit yourself individually and as a parish to living as the community of the Risen Christ? To living in a new way, loving one another as Christ has loved us? Living like this now? Here? Today?

May God make it so. Amen.