

THE PRACTICE OF LOVE

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Grace Church in New York
John 15:9-17
May 6, 2018

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”

As some of you know, I attended the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana for my undergraduate. What you may not know about the University of Illinois is that we have the oldest experimental agricultural field in the country, indeed the second oldest in the whole world. It began in 1876 as a five acre plot of land to test the theory of crop rotation, and was instrumental in showing that, in fact, rotating the kinds of crops grown there from season to season allows the soil to rejuvenate, and produces a better harvest year after year than if the plot were only ever used for one kind of produce. This field is called the Morrow Plots after the agricultural engineer George Morrow who was instrumental in establishing his field and these plots. The Morrow Plots are now only one-half-acre in size, but they are in the dead-center of campus, connecting the main quad with the south quad. The University loves these plots—is so proud of these plots—that when we built our main library, also in the center of campus, we built the three-story library underground, so that we wouldn’t throw shade on the corn of Morrow Plots.

One of my very favorite memories from my college years were the Sundays when my church, which was across the street from the main quad, would walk out of our church service and process over to the Morrow Plots, and walk all the way around the whole corn field, swinging incense and chanting. Together we prayed over the Morrow Plots, asking for God’s blessing, abundance, and protection over this field of corn. If you are unfamiliar with this tradition, I’m sure it sounds bizarre. But I assure you, we were carrying on an ancient tradition of honoring Rogation Sunday. I bring this up, because today is Rogation Sunday. Since we live in New York City, there are not likely any churches near us who are participating in this ancient rite of blessing the crops, but some of our fellow Episcopal congregations in rural places across the country, and our Anglican brothers and sisters in agricultural communities around the globe, certainly are. Rogation Sunday is the day set aside to thank God for having survived the winter, and to ask God’s blessing on the newly planted crops. Hence walking around the Morrow Plots, swinging incense and chanting prayers asking for abundance and protection. Even though Rogation Sunday is once a year, and so we walked around the Morrow Plots once a year, the feeling stayed with me all year. I think that’s why I loved this practice so much: for the rest of the year, every time I walked past the Morrow Plots, which was often, I was reminded of my church, as a community, going out into the world to pray to God and celebrate what God has already given us. This gratitude returned to me often, each time I walked to class, or returned home again.

We are shaped and formed by the traditions we practice. So often we don’t pause to give them much thought, but it’s the things we do repeatedly, until they are a habit, that ultimately determine how we understand ourselves, our lives, and our roles in the world. By participating

in the tradition of Rogation Sunday, I inherited a practice of gratitude, which I took on for myself as a habit, and allowed it to shape who I was on campus: I was someone who gave thanks for the silly little corn field on the middle of my campus, and every other little thing I loved about being there. Maybe you have traditions, practices, and habits that shape who you are, too.

The church, when she is at her best, is a place where we inherit traditions that shape and form us to know ourselves as God's beloved, and God's people in the world. This is because our very best traditions, practices, and habits are those that we do because of Jesus. Why do we have a tradition of the Holy Eucharist, the practice of breaking bread and pouring out wine, the habit of coming together for this sacred meal? Because Jesus said, "do this in remembrance of me." Why do we have a tradition of baptizing people and bringing them into the membership of the church? Because Jesus said, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Why do we make a practice of helping those in need? Because Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." Why do we recite the Lord's Prayer so much that it becomes a habit? Because Jesus taught us those very words to use.

Today's Gospel reading is another one of those readings where Jesus teaches his disciples, all the disciples, from his original twelve all the way up to those of us gathered here today, Jesus teaches his disciples: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."

It could be argued that this commandment, that we love one another, is the hardest, most challenging of Jesus' commandments. Sharing the Holy Eucharist and remembering our Lord's last supper? Enjoyable! Baptizing new people into the Body of Christ? Celebratory! Helping those in need? Rewarding! Praying as Jesus taught us? Spiritually gratifying! But loving one another as Jesus has loved us?!

Doesn't Jesus know us? Doesn't Jesus understand that people can be so frustrating, even infuriating? Doesn't Jesus see that in this world, loving each other can make us vulnerable to the ways in which people hurt each other? Put each other down? Even oppress one another? Has Jesus not made the connection between the love he showed the world around him, and the way the world treated him? The love he showed his disciples and yet their betrayal and abandonment of him? Even after knowing they would do these things, and telling them that they would do these things, he loved them, fine, but did he have to go and command them to love one another as he loved them? And if, even they are given this commandment without reservation, aren't we, too, despite our faults and our failings, expected to love each other just as Jesus loved us?

I suspect that there's really only one way to love each other as Jesus loved us, which is precisely to love each *as Jesus loved us*. Jesus loved us by first receiving the love of the Father. Jesus was the very embodiment of God's love for us and God's love for all. Jesus was so filled with God's love that it spilled over and drenched others. Jesus was so filled with God's love that it empowered him to heal, to restore, and to reconcile. Jesus was so filled with God's love that he was able to risk everything, even his very life, for the sake of that same love. Jesus was so filled with God's love that when sin and death tried to take hold in him there was no room left, and

Jesus was so filled with God's love that the very worst of what humanity could do to him would not keep him from coming back for them again.

And in today's Gospel reading, we are invited into that very same love. We are invited into the love of God that calls us friends, or in the original Greek, calls us "loves ones." We are invited into the love of God that empowers us to heal, to restore, and to reconcile. We are invited into the love of God that allows us to look out at the world and spot the kingdom of God. We are invited into the love of God that makes it possible for us to love others as Jesus has loved us.

I realize that I'm making it sound so easy, when you and I both know it's the hardest thing.

But here we are, Jesus' disciples, wanting so very much to live out this commandment that he has given us, knowing that it feels the request might be more than we can do. So what should we do?

Practice. Create practices for ourselves that remind us of God's love for us and then practice sharing that love with others. Participate in traditions that remind us of God's love for us and then make traditions of sharing that love with others. Form habits that allow us to feel God's love for us and then make a habit out of sharing God's love with others.

That's what Jesus did. Despite the crowds and his intimate circle always clamoring for more of his time, Jesus had an unrelenting prayer practice where he turned to God and was refreshed and strengthened through reconnecting with the love he knew he'd find there. Despite how little they understood what was happening and how poorly it was received, Jesus took a towel, tied it around his waist, and washed the disciples' feet, taking on the role traditionally reserved for servants and slaves. And going all the way back to the Incarnation, where God was made human so that God could abide with us, Jesus made a habit of bring fully present with each and every person he encountered. So much so that, even when he disagreed with them, he yet loved them.

As I said before, the church, when she is at her best, is a place where we inherit traditions that shape and form us to know ourselves as God's beloved, and help us to create practices and habits as God's people in the world. Sometimes these traditions seem like they're from another time and place, like the Rogation Sunday blessing over the Morrow Plots, but that tradition instilled in me a practice of giving thanks for my school and everything about my school on my way to class and on my way home again, each day. Without Rogation Sunday, I would not have been such a grateful person.

Where have you found the church to be a place where you learn practices that shape you into someone who lives out Jesus' commandment to love as he loved? What traditions of the church remind you of how loved by God you are? Maybe it's the Good Friday meditations, maybe it's the Easter celebrations. What practices of the church help you to grow closer to God and begin to see others as God's beloved, too? Maybe it's the Holy Eucharist, maybe it's the prayers, maybe it's coffee hour! What habits have you learned in this community which sustain you the rest of the week and help you to love others as Jesus loves you? Maybe it's ways to serve others, maybe it's your personal prayer life.

Or, maybe you don't know. Maybe you're not sure. If this is you, if you fall into this camp, you are not alone. I suspect that this uncertainty is exactly how Jesus' original disciples felt, and how countless of disciples have felt ever since. Yet, Jesus' commandment to love is an invitation for you, too. An invitation to know God's love for you, and let that love shape who you are in the world. An invitation to model your life after Jesus', loving each person, in each moment, each day of each year. It won't be as easy for us as it was for Jesus, but that's why we come to church to practice.

Together, we practice this kind of love until this kind of love becomes our practice.