

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Easter

RCL Lectionary

[Acts 11:1-18](#) / [Psalm 148](#) / [Revelation 21:1-6](#) / [John 13:31-35](#)

May 2nd, 2010

The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California

Love and the City of God by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

It is probably no accident that the author of John juxtaposes Jesus' teaching about love to his apostles with Judas' betrayal. Love is the divine response to all betrayal – both Judas' and our own – great and small. And we all know how betrayal affects communities and families, and how much the disciples will need the commandment to love one another to hold them together as they face the impending crucifixion and the shock – however joyous – of the resurrection. They will need the commandment as they found the church and carry the Gospel into new places. They will need it as they deal with all of the rough-and-tumble humanity that communities bring.

Our secular culture has a difficult time with love as a commandment. Even more so with love as a discipline, which to me the word "commandment" implies. We prefer romantic love, as in the focus on fleeting feelings and attractions depicted too often in two dimensions by Hollywood. We pigeon-hole love too often in the realm of the physical with fixations on sexuality and our incessant study of hormones and tabloid pictures of edited bodies.

But Christians communities have always had a hard time with love, too. I remember once being told by an evangelical pastor that human love cannot be transformative – only divine love can change hearts. After ten years of marriage and eight years wrestling with Christian community, experience has taught me the exact opposite. Just the presence of human beings in loving relationships is inherently transformative. Yes, it all ultimately must come from God, and we have little control over what kind of transformation our love will bring, but we only limit ourselves and our true responsibility to Christ's call to our most sacred of disciplines by saying that only God's love can change us. Even our imperfect love is like a pebble dropped into a pond, and we never know how far those ripples will carry change into every corner and cove of the lives around us.

We avoid the language of discipline when it comes to love, because love is truly a frightening thing. It causes us to set aside our own agendas and even at times our own needs for the needs of others. It demands a patience that to which most of us can only aspire. It can exhaust us emotionally out of our concern for the people and creatures of God we most deeply cherish. It means sooner or later, we will confront pain: the pain of loss, betrayal, disappointment. It means loneliness will sometime be part of our experience. It means we will have to be quiet and listen at times and speak our mind at others. In other words, we will have to show up in relationship. It means we will have to tend some boundaries, cross others, and live in the challenging tension of what it means to be both different and alike at the

same time. It means justice in love will demand at times we do or say what's unpopular, what the crowds don't want to hear. And that can place us in peril.

It means we will have to stay present when things are uncomfortable, when people are upset with us, when we are upset with them, when things are not going our way. And yes, it means that it simply is no longer our way or the highway. That, along with all of our selfish ambitions, egotistical agendas, and expectations about *the way things should be* will be set aside for the sake of others.

In the discipline of love, people are longer means to an end. Our utilitarian notions and that haunting question, "What's in it for me?" are going to die slow, difficult deaths in love's warm light. We're even learning that the discipline of love teaches us that God's creation is no longer a means to an end – it is no longer a bottomless resource to be exploited for our individual gain or our gain as a species. The discipline of love tempers our economic system and our material striving, if it does not utterly unhinge them. We see ourselves as connected, as part of a greater whole, rather than particulate bodies competing with one another, bouncing off each other, and colliding on occasion.

Discipline takes time, takes practice, and takes commitment. For all of us, it takes some measure of vowing, of promising. Many of our vows are unspoken. Some are publicly declared. But they all have hallmarks of the discipline of love: trust, fidelity, honor, commitment. Even that vow we don't like to talk about too much in the individualist West comes into play: obedience. Sooner or later, we will be asked to acquiesce to the needs of the other or the greater whole. We can't always follow the beat of our own drum. That's what loving obedience is about: about that humility that is derived from first the recognition, and then the intentional living into the reality that we are not the center of the universe.

But discipline above all else is about discipleship – about following our great Teacher in the paths of love. He offers his followers this commandment just before he offers them and the world for all time the greatest love of all – himself – and not only to the powers of evil and death, but to the even greater power of resurrection. No matter how imperfect our discipline, our discipleship of love, may be, Jesus has already prepared the Way, and we are drawn along this path of love by God's unwavering grace.

And the end of that journey, the outcome, is what the author of Revelation so beautifully envisions in our reading today: the City of God, a new city built fundamentally on the love God has for us, the love we have for God, and the love we have for one another. A place where God lives with us and we live with God. It is forever in the process of becoming, but the discipline of love is its foundation. It is this foundation that Jesus leaves his followers – all of us – to tend. . . each according to our gifts.

And in this way, the discipline of love is not just for now, but it is for all time. It is the discipline for who we are becoming as God's people. It's a discipline, in a radical way for each of us and all of us together, for all eternity.