

Fifth Sunday of Lent, Year C  
Acts 14:21-27  
Ps 145 *passim*  
Rev 21:1-5a  
Jn 13:31-33a, 34-35

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“I give you a new commandment,” says the Lord Jesus. “Love one another as I have loved you.”

The theme that runs through all three of today’s Scripture readings is newness and change. The first one is from the Acts of the Apostles, as is the case with all the Sundays of Easter. Acts tells the story of how the Church (although still rooted in Judaism) came to identify itself as separate from and independent of the Jewish religion. Last week we saw Paul and Barnabas rejoicing at having been called to bring God’s word to the Gentiles. Today’s passage covers the first of St. Paul’s three missionary journeys. In 6 verses it covers months and months of preaching while traveling from city to city in the Greco-Roman world. Establishing how Gentiles practice the faith without reliance on the customs and rules of Judaism was something new, which Paul and Barnabas, with the Holy Spirit’s guidance, had to make up on the fly.

In the second reading, from the Book of Revelation, John the Evangelist had a vision of a new world – a new heaven, a new earth, a new Jerusalem. The sea, the realm of chaos – well, “the sea was no more.” He envisions this old world of chaos and pain and sorrow and ugliness and death as giving way to a new world of joy and harmony and beauty and abundant life. God offers over and over again a covenant relationship with humankind. In its simplest form, the covenant reads “I will be your God and you will be my people.” When the covenant is fulfilled, then God will wipe every tear from every eye; God will take away death and mourning, wailing and pain. God will make all things new.

Today’s Gospel is from the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of John. Chapter 13 begins with Jesus washing the feet of his disciples. Right after, Jesus explains, “You must wash each other’s feet. I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done to you.” And later he gives the new commandment: “Love one another,” he says, “as I have loved you.”

“A new commandment. . .” At first blush, it doesn’t seem all that new. In each of the other three Gospels, Jesus summarizes the law in two great commandments: (1) Love God with your whole heart, with every fiber of your being. And (2) love your neighbor as yourself. That second command goes all the way back to the third book of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Book of Leviticus.

“Love your enemies; pray for those who persecute you” [*Mt 5:44*]. Now *that* seems new. The command Jesus gives in today’s Gospel is new because of the new point of reference and comparison Jesus uses: “Love one another as I have loved you.” The love Jesus

showed in washing his disciples' feet, and in becoming one of us, and in dying on the cross, is far greater than loving oneself. And Jesus repeats himself later in John's Gospel. In chapter 15 Jesus says, "This is my commandment: love one another as I love you." After which he adds, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." Jesus shows self-sacrificing love. Jesus calls us to self-sacrificing love.

Self-sacrificing love. . . How do we do that? How do we love our enemies? How do we love our neighbor like another self? How do we lay down our lives for one another?

The first step, I suppose, is to hear God's word, to open our hearts and let God's word take root in us. The second step is to pray. It's easy to pray for those we love and for those who love us. It's hard to pray for those who bug us, for those who try our patience, for those we dislike.

One of our practices here at St. Pet's is to pass the basket from hand to hand during the offertory collection. A few years ago I invited each of us to consciously grab hold of the basket, whether or not we have an envelope or other monetary contribution to make, and to place in the basket, figuratively, whatever we may be struggling with at the time. Our fears, our concerns, our anxieties – put 'em in the basket. The contents of the baskets all get poured together and are carried up to the front at the offertory procession with the altar breads and the wine to be consecrated. From there all the struggles we've put into the basket get placed on the altar with the bread and the wine, to be lifted up by our priest and transformed. "Behold," says the Lord, "I make all things new."

I renew my invitation today. Place all those people who bug you in the basket. Everybody you want to write off as a jerk, put them in the basket. The guy who cut you off in traffic, place him in the basket. The one who wrote bad things about you on social media, put her in the basket. The neighbor who never has a kind word for anybody, put him (or her) in the basket. The co-worker or classmate who knifed you in the back, put them in the basket.

"I give you a new commandment: love one another as I have loved you," with self-sacrificing love.

And why has the Church selected this message of self-sacrificing love for the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter? Jesus gave us the reason in the first part of today's Gospel: in loving the way Jesus loves, we glorify God. In glorifying God, we help God bring about the new heaven and the new earth, where there is no more death or mourning.

"I give you a new commandment," says the Lord Jesus. "Love one another as I have loved you."