

## SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER | MAY 14, 2023

ACTS 17:22-31 | PSALM 66:8-20 | 1 PETER 3:13-22 | JOHN 14:15-21

To borrow a line from Rabbi Hillel, Easter is all about love. Everything else is commentary. Every act of grace, every covenant of mercy, and every sign of resurrection is an act of divine love. And through the power of the Holy Spirit, everything Christ's church seeks through its actions, teaching, and proclamation is rooted in, directed toward, and reconciled in that same love.

Jesus says as much in today's gospel reading. "They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."

The more legally minded among us may say, *But that's not all about love. It's about keeping God's commandments.* But what is the new commandment that John's Jesus gives us? We hear it every Maundy Thursday. "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

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That isn't to say that it's easy. There are lots of obvious ways that we fail to love our neighbors the way that Christ loves them. The most common way we fail to love is through indifference. By making our neighbors someone else's responsibility and passing by on the other side of the road. That's to say nothing of the violence and hatred that tear so much of our world apart. Not just shrugging at the plight of others, but by throwing an elbow at those we despise.

But there's another, more subtle way that we fail to love our neighbors, and it's alluded to in today's first reading from Acts. In this reading, Luke's Paul is giving a big speech in Athens to a group of well-educated Gentiles. These people love talking about philosophy and theology, but they don't know about the resurrection of Jesus. And so Paul tries to explain how the God of Israel has redeemed all of creation through Jesus in language that they would understand. He starts off—as all preachers do—by flattering his audience. "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way." *Nowhere I'd rather be than Athens, the greatest city in the world!*

And after earning his audience's attention, this is how he introduces Jesus's God. He says, "The God who made the world and everything in it... [is not] served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things."

Now many people would think that's boring and just skip over it. But because you are exceptionally smart, diligent, and insightful readers, you probably thought *That's interesting that he'd have to say that.* And sure enough, this wasn't something that Paul could take for granted. Around the time that this book was written, there was this influential movement in the early church called the gnostic movement. And one of their beliefs was that God created humanity out of need. Essentially, God made the universe, found it was too big and complicated to manage, tried to fix it by watching YouTube videos, gave up, and begrudgingly said, *Fine. I'll create humanity to help me manage this project.*

In that story, God creates and enters out of relationship out of need. Why are you in relationship with God? In the gnostic story, it's so you can work or perform a task or provide some resource. And if you can't work hard enough or meet that need, well, God could care less. In that story, God's not really interested in you, God's really interested in getting something from you.

Maybe you can think of times in your own life when you've felt like this. When you've been in a relationship with someone and started to think, *I think this person isn't really interested in me, they're*

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*just using me to get to this other thing.* Maybe it's a friend who only reaches out when they want you to solve a problem, but never wants to hear about yours. Or a family member who seems to only turn up when money is involved. Or a pastor who's just interested in access to your pool. (These are hypotheticals!)

Sometimes churches struggle with this, too. There are few things more depressing than congregations that are so caught up in their preconceived needs that they forget why they exist in the first place. One of my colleagues recently told me an all-too-common story about a time when she brought her kids with her to mass when she was on vacation. Everyone at this church was loving, welcoming, inviting, etc. right until they found out she was visiting from out of town. And the smiles melted away, they shrugged and said, "Well, we need kids for our Sunday school." How does it feel when someone interacts with you like that? Disappointing. Sort of gross. Maybe we even feel taken advantage of. Because you realize this person isn't interested in me. They just see me as a means to this other thing, this other agenda that they have.

This is why Paul makes a point of saying that God doesn't need anything. Because it means that God is in relationship with us because God loves us. Not because there's some other thing God is trying to get out of this relationship other than being in our company. Paul tells us that we're not needed. We're loved.

Saying *God loves you* sounds tired and cliché, but it's getting at something deeply counter-cultural. We're saying God loves *you*. God doesn't love some possession you have. God doesn't love some skill you possess. God doesn't love some other version of you that you could be if you tried really hard. God loves *you*.

And when Jesus gives us his resurrection life, he gives us that same resurrection love to share with the world. The kind of love that can be offered freely without concern for what we're going to get in return or what other people are going to do for us. No strings, no asterisks, no other shoe to drop. We love because God first loved us.

You know this. What is our vision for our life together as the people of God in this place? Inspiring, strengthening, and giving hope through faith and love. We aspire to be a community where everything we do in our personal vocations and communal life is done in love. Where the primary force that shapes our relationships with others is not our anxiety about whether they can meet our needs, but the new life given to all in the resurrection of Jesus. And thanks to what Jesus calls the Advocate—what we just call the Holy Spirit—that love is not just a goal to aspire to but a gift to receive and share every day.

So what's the resurrection of Jesus all about? What's our purpose as God's people all about? It's all about love. Everything else is commentary.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor