

## FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER | MAY 15, 2022

ACTS 11:1-8 | PSALM 148 | REVELATION 21:1-6 | JOHN 13:31-35

One afternoon in the 1960s, Peter Scholtes was working with his youth choir on the south side of Chicago. The choir was a multi-racial and ecumenical group of kids from around the neighborhood, and Scholtes was struggling to find music that reflected their diversity. So eventually he just gave up looking and wrote something himself based on today's gospel reading. The song goes, "We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord / And we pray that our unity will one day be restored / And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love."<sup>1</sup>

It's a catchy tune. Lyrics are pretty good. It definitely has that post-Vatican II vibe shift. But there's something about it that leaves a weird taste in your mouth after you sing it. It's subtext in today's gospel reading, but the hymn puts it front and center. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Take that line by itself, and it's hard to know how to interpret it. For one, it seems to suggest that Christians, disciples of Jesus, the church, etc. love their neighbors more than others. We are somehow more loving people than our Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, agnostic, atheist, or "spiritual but not religious" neighbors. When we serve our neighbors, we do it with a big #1 foam finger.

Second, Jesus ties this concept of love to recognition. Not only will disciples of Jesus love each other, but that love will be recognizable to others. When you see someone feeding the hungry, sheltering the unhoused, clothing the naked, welcoming the immigrant, you will think to yourself, "That person must be a Christian." And if it's a really charitable act, you'll think, "I bet they're a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America."

The first claim is self-righteous past the point of parody. The second is just obviously wrong. So what are we supposed to do?

To try to get us out of this jam, we're going to start by looking at the words in the reading, zoom out to its setting in John's gospel, and then zoom out even further to our own community. And when you do that, the importance of Jesus's words become clearer.

So first, the words themselves. You may have noticed that Scholtes's hymn sticks very close to the gospel reading, except for one small change. And it just so happens that it's a little jump that many of us make in our heads, too. It swaps out "disciple" for "Christian." Scholtes was probably just trying to fit the meter, but those words have different connotations. We tend to think of "Christian" as a static category. When I fill out a survey, I check the box that says "Christian." And there are

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<sup>1</sup> In case you're curious, this isn't in any of our hymnals. It's in the new PC(USA) one and the Catholic supplemental volume. Scholtes ended up leaving the priesthood and going into business consulting in the 1980s.

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always boxes I'm choosing not to check. We often use "Christian" as an adjective that describes something that already exists.

"Disciple" is different. It comes from the Greek word for student. And the image here is active, dynamic, and open.<sup>2</sup> It's focused on Jesus, so it doesn't need to define itself over and against others. "Disciple" is really a verb that describes how God forms and shapes us as the body of Christ. So when we love, we participate in the love of God made known in Jesus.

And that becomes clearer when you zoom out to the context of this gospel reading. We are hearing this in the Easter season, but this story comes during the last days of Jesus's life. More specifically, this is from John's last supper story. So Jesus's understanding of love isn't just a general definition. Love is just being nice and pleasant and all the rest. It's an echo of the way that Jesus gives himself for us at table. Jesus gives himself to us so that we can give ourselves to others. The love of discipleship isn't efficient or perfect, but it's vulnerable and tender.

You may have noticed that some of our post-communion prayers talk about how we give ourselves away as bread for the hungry. That's making the same point. What the world needs is not just your time or your effort or your money or your skills. What the world needs is you.

Which brings us to this community. Our mission statement, which we adopted unanimously back in 2020, says that we "inspire, strengthen, and give hope through faith and love." Everything we do here is marked by faith—trust in God's promises—and love—the gift we receive here at table. You defined this community not in terms of the edges, but in terms of the center. We are a people who gather together at table.

So you remember those problems I talked about earlier? Those issues of whether we are morally superior to others or whether others can identify us correctly, this focus keeps us gets rid of all of that. Because what defines our community isn't who we let in and who we keep out. We don't need to define ourselves against other people. What defines our community, the place we find our unity, is the center.

That center is inviting. You all know this, but who do we invite to celebrate here at table? Everybody. Young, questioning, old, widowed, divorced, single, straight, trans, overworked, devout, unemployed, agnostic, technically still Methodist, whatever. And we do that not because we're just being squishy bleeding hearts, but because we take the real presence of Jesus here at table seriously. You are someone God desires to be in relationship with right now. You are someone that the world needs. And so is everyone else here. Real presence means real invitation.

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<sup>2</sup> "To be a disciple in the Gospel of John is to be an extension of, or act out, God's love. Discipleship is an incarnated reality, just as the Word made flesh. It is not an abstract existence of following, or confession, but suggests that discipleship is the presence of the Word made flesh in the world when Jesus returns to the Father." Lewis, Karoline M.. John (Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentaries) (p. 16). Fortress Press. Kindle Edition.

That center is creative. Who is the church? It's the people who gather around Christ's table. And every Sunday, God creates that new community all over again. And whether it's your first time here or your five thousandth time here or you meant to go to St. Elizabeth's but you took a wrong turn and now you feel like you can't leave, you are an integral part of the body of Christ in this assembly. You're not a guest in my space or a visitor to our church or a potential member. You are a real part of the body of Christ in this place.

And that center is loving. Assembled together at table, we become the body of Christ, the love of God poured out in the world. God sends us from table as disciples who follow the risen Christ into the world to be his hands and feet. Not with the foam fingers announcing how loving we are. But with hands that are wounded by the wraths and sorrows of life; hands with bread for all who hunger for good news. And it's by this, Jesus says, that everyone will know that you are my disciples.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor