

Title: How Would Jesus Love?

Date: 4/28/2024 (Easter 5, Year B)

Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church

Service: 10 am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)

Readings: [Acts 8:26-40](#); [1 John 4:7-21](#); [John 15:1-8](#); [Psalm 22:24-30](#)

Audio Link: <https://podcasters.spotify.com/pod/show/st-albans-austin/episodes/How-Would-Jesus-Love-e2j1l6n/a-ab7h3ec>

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/3osVQyXBIw?t=1231>

Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another...if we love one another, God lives in us, and the love of God is perfected in us (1 John 4:11-12).

Amen.

When I hear this passage from the first letter of John, I want to knit these words into a blanket and wrap them around me. I want to rest in the love of God, take a nap in the warmth of that love. I want to feel that love deep in my bones and flowing through me and pouring out of me to wrap other people in this sense of comfort. I want to stay still...in these words.

And yet, something gnaws at me, the word “perfect.”

I consider myself a recovering perfectionist. To be clear, it is good to set goals. It is important to have standards. Outlining a plan, or process, or framework, is always the first step.

For **me**, the pitfall of being a perfectionist is that I can become hyper-focused on getting it right. Even worse, I convince myself that I'm the **ONLY** person who can get it right, that it's all on my shoulders. It keeps me from being adaptable and from listening to other people's ideas and experiences.

For **me**, the trouble with being a perfectionist is that I get so wrapped around the axle about **my** effectiveness and **my** productivity that I lose sight of the big picture. I forget this is not about me, this is about **us**. I don't give myself and, by extension, other people, the permission to be creative, to just keep experimenting, to **play**.

So, it's helpful to go back to these words from the Collect of the Day, the opening prayer that gives us a framework that helps us read, mark, and inwardly digest the readings for today: O God, grant us so perfectly to know your Son Jesus Christ to be the way, the truth, and the life, that we may steadfastly follow his steps in the way that leads to eternal life.¹

Jesus is the way, and we are following in his steps.

Jesus doesn't stop moving until he is crucified and buried, and then not even then!

Jesus is a goal in that we want to move in his direction. Jesus is a standard in that we're trying to get closer to him. But Jesus doesn't stay in one place. Yes, he stops to pray and

eat, and then he moves. This is a constant cycle, but it's not the same thing as spinning in place.

Reading the scripture through this framework helps me notice that out of the four times the word "perfect" shows up in this letter, twice John is writing about love being perfected and once he is writing about reaching perfection in love.

So, maybe this isn't about getting a perfect grade when it comes to how we love. Maybe this is about always looking for ways that move us toward loving one another as God loves us.

On the one hand, this sounds so simple.

Just love each other.

Just love each other.

In the immortal words of the Beatles, "There's nothin' you can know that isn't known/Nothin' you can see that isn't shown/There's nowhere you can be that isn't where you're meant to be/It's easy/All you need is love...Love is all you need."²

All we need to do is keep singing these words. All we need to do is keep proclaiming these words from the first letter of John.

And yet, it is as simple to love in theory
as it is complex
to love in practice.

On Monday, we celebrated Earth Day. We can give God our thanks and praise for entrusting us with this world. We can talk about loving all of God's creation and all of God's creatures. Sounds beautiful, right? That gets complex when we start asking ourselves:

What kind of life
does **this** kind of love
commit us to living?

It feels good to recycle and to use products made out of recycled or compostable materials. Nowadays, products are packaged such that they shout the virtues and values we might care to uphold.

Biodegradable! Sustainable! Free Trade! Cruelty Free!

However, all of that is focused on **redirecting** our consumption. It doesn't push us to examine the impact we're still making. It doesn't reflect the real long-term cost to human laborers or the environment. It doesn't try to reduce our consumption by asking us to consider what we really need and how much.

It feels good when we can change our habits and be intentional about the way we live. It's not nothing. AND, as I learned during years of drought in California, this is a small drop in the bucket compared to the resources consumed by corporations on our behalf. If we so choose, if we are open to the commitment that love demands, we may find that our personal responsibility extends far beyond our own daily living.

This week, students on campuses across the country are protesting the plight of Palestinians in Gaza. In the face of so much death and destruction, some are calling for their schools to divest from Israeli businesses.

Some are calling for the US government to stop funding the war between Israel and Hamas. At UT Austin, more than fifty people were arrested at a peaceful protest on Wednesday, though all charges have been dropped.³

At the same time, some equate solidarity with Palestinians with Antisemitism. Some see that as condoning the actions of Hamas on and after Oct 7. UT's Texas Hillel denounced the protests as "making use of Passover, a Jewish holiday and observance, to promote a hateful agenda."⁴ Some Jewish students have reported that they don't feel safe.

In the midst of conflicts like this one, it's easy to accuse those who are advocating for one agenda or the other as acting out of hate, even though I can see how everyone involved can claim to be acting out of love.

It's hard not to frame this in binaries and talk about one side vs the other. As I'm writing this, I have to actively resist using that kind of language – this side and that side, pro- and anti- -- as if there is no nuance in between. Even so, I might fall short in a way that I can't foresee. But that doesn't mean I shouldn't try.

As our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry says, "If it's not about love, it's not about God."⁵ So, what does it look like for us to love everyone in the midst of conflict and across divisions?

In today's gospel, Jesus said to his disciples, "I am the true vine... Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me" (Jn 15:1,4).

There's a rhythm and repetition to the word "abide" in this passage as there was with the word "love" in the previous one. It's a state of being that is **also** a state of action. Perhaps this is the heartbeat that keeps us alive in Christ Jesus, breathing in the Spirit of God.

"Abide...in love"
"Abide...in love"
"Abide...in love"

Jesus said that whoever does not abide in him is thrown away like a branch and withers. So, abiding in him looks like staying connected to him no matter how the winds of the world try to pull us away. It looks like resisting the temptation to seek out an easier and more comfortable way.

Abiding in Jesus looks like coming fully alive. We unfurl our leaves, and stretch farther into the world without losing our connection to the vine. It looks like the children of God becoming more fully the image of God and bearing the fruit of God, which is more love and more life for **all** of God's creation and God's children.

At the same time, abiding in Jesus doesn't look like staying in one place the way a branch stays on the vine. It's more like parking an RV than buying a house.

It's staying still...so that we can listen for what the Spirit is saying to us and then follow where it leads.

It's reading Scripture on our own...and to have the humility to open metaphorical doors AND physical doors to guidance from all kinds of sources.

It's remembering that the good news of Jesus is not only found in his resurrection and ascension, but in how he lived his life.

When we talk about, "abide in love," that's not about being nice, that's not about feeling warmly toward someone else or tolerating their presence. It's about abiding in the Jesus kind of love.

Jesus didn't just tell us he loved us; he showed us. He healed, and he cast out demons. He fed us, and he ate with us, and he cared for our tired feet. He went away to pray, because that kind of Sabbath gave him the strength and endurance and heart to **keep** loving us, and so he always came back to the crowds.

To abide in Jesus is to steadfastly follow his steps in the way that leads to eternal life. It is to **love** as he did and to **live** as he did.

It seems odd to compare humans to the branches of a vine. Unlike the branches of a vine, we can choose to hold on to the branch or to let go. But similar to the branches of the vine, when we stop taking in nourishment from the vine, we will fall away.

The hard part is that sometimes we don't realize we've become disconnected from the vine, that we are no longer abiding in the way, the truth, and the life of Jesus the Christ. We don't realize when we started to follow idols of our own making. We aren't aware that our energy is coming from fear masked as righteous anger. We can't see that a narrow definition of life and an ever-shrinking circle of those we consider to be our neighbors and siblings will result in more fear than love, more death than life.

Some people ask, "What would Jesus do?"

Maybe it's more clarifying to ask, "How would Jesus love?"

In this moment, in this place, what would it look like for us to love another as Jesus loved us, to love in the midst of conflict and across divisions?

It looks like having a heart that is big enough to hold the simple AND the complex. It's less about standing with one group or another, especially those groups aren't monoliths. It looks like standing for love and life for all.

As Rabbi Avigail Halpern observes, "The image of people frantically fleeing, attempting to bring as much food as they can carry while under the shadow of an empire's military assault is an essential part of the [Passover] narrative."⁶

She writes about struggling to observe a holiday of liberation when so many of her fellow Jews will "matzah around seder tables and endorse ideas and actions that are anything but liberatory."

Perhaps abiding in love, abiding in the way Jesus loved, is to see in her words a mirror,
-a mirror to reflect on the things that are happening here, around us, as we continue to celebrate the season of Easter

-a mirror that encourages us to participate in resurrection, to stand with those seeking transformation and new life

-a mirror that inspires us to draw on our faith to keep asking hard questions that get at the complexity of the truth instead of settling for easy answers and to stay in relationship even when it's hard, especially when it's hard.

Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. So, let us, as our hearts beat,

"Abide...in love"

"Abide...in love"

"Abide...in love"

Amen.

¹ https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Easter/BEaster5_RCL.html

² <https://genius.com/The-beatles-all-you-need-is-love-lyrics>

³ <https://www.kut.org/education/2024-04-26/ut-austin-protest-arrests-campus-ban>

⁴ <https://www.statesman.com/story/news/local/2024/04/24/ut-austin-campus-student-protest-arrest-pro-palestine-protests-walk-out/73425149007/>

⁵ <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/presiding-bishop-michael-curry/>

⁶ A justice-oriented Haggadah reader with contributions from members of Halachic Left, All That's Left, and HaSmol HaEmuni
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1kNhiqgFP5NB3CCJaPn9VgArCJ8X5vM_T/edit