

The Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year C, 2010
John 13:31-35
The Rev. Ronald N. Johnson

It always strikes me as strange that today's gospel reading occurs on the Fifth Sunday of Easter. At least strangeness is my first impression. In chronological context, this passage belongs to Maundy Thursday and the Last Supper, where Jesus proclaimed his new commandment: "Love one another as I love you." But, when I start to think about it, things come together and I realize that this commandment, "Love one another as I love you," can only be understood in the light of post-Easter faith. You have to have experienced the love of Christ, which is unconditional love within the context of the Cross, in order to understand what it means to love someone, other than yourself, as Christ loves us. To love others as Christ loves us is to join Jesus in the loving, and this is what makes Christian loving different from any other love.

Think about this understanding of Christian love, inclusive and unconditional, in the reality of life in the early Church. Saint Luke, author of Acts, quotes Paul and Barnabas, missionaries to the Gentiles, this way: "The Lord commanded us to be a light to the Gentiles, bringing salvation to all parts of the world." When a Jew, said "Gentile," and this includes Paul and Barnabas, both Jews, they meant "non-believers," people outside the faith, culture and tradition of Israel. Gentiles were almost universally scorned by Jews of the first century. The Lord's mandate to St. Paul and his companion was to take the good news of God's love, expressed in Jesus Christ, to the Gentiles, meaning all non-Jews, in other words, the entire world, proclaiming that God's love is unconditional and excludes none. And in today's gospel reading we are told, if we consider ourselves disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ, that our job, is exactly the same as Barnabas' and Paul's. It is to proclaim that unconditional love by living that love, in thought, word and deed.

Christian love takes incredible courage. Any time that we put ourselves on the line and say that regardless of the cost, we will follow Jesus, and in any situation we will proclaim Christ's unconditional love for all of God's people, we are going to encounter scorn, rejection and hatred. To borrow a phrase and load it with Christian meaning, we are going to get nailed by those who hate. But those who hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ and dwell in his love stand and shine a light that brings freedom from the bonds of narrow-mindedness and prejudice, from the bondage of bigotry and phobia.

I do not believe that one can truly be a Christian and, by their thoughts, words or actions exclude anyone from God's love. A Christian must take to heart Saint Paul's words that in Christ Jesus all are one, therefore all humanity are equal in the sight of God. *Amen.*