

Fifth Sunday of Easter – May 6, 2007
Ascension Episcopal Church, Hinton, WV
“If You Have Love for One Another”

The Rev. Kent Higgins

This week I read with interest contributions to a list of “shortest sermons on record.” The winner, at least in my opinion, was “God loves you.” But who, after all, wants to compete to have the shortest sermon?

I would offer, however, a statement with which any preacher, at any time and in any place, can begin a sermon. That statement is: “We are engaged in building The Church, capital T capital C.”

This is not a statement about building buildings, or increasing membership, or any of those kinds of thing which so often find themselves talked about in the church, little t, little c. “Building The Church” is about you and me and one another and all the people who are someplace other than here. The statement has to do with what it means to be the Body of Christ.

Today seems an especially appropriate time to begin a sermon this way, so...”We are engaged in building The Church, capital T capital C.”

It is appropriate firstly because our bishop set the theme at last year’s diocesan convention as “Build My Church.” Secondly, the lessons for this Sunday – and in fact for the entire season of Easter – deal with the idea of what The Church is and how the early Church wrestled with that issue. And thirdly, after our service today we’re having a “sit down coffee hour” to talk about a mission statement.

In the Gospel reading today from John, we hear Jesus say: “³⁴ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”¹

This new commandment – which is, by the way, the mandate given by Jesus at the Last Supper and from which the name “Maundy Thursday” derives – “Maundy” coming from the Latin root *mandamus* – to mandate or to command – this “new commandment” is at the heart of Church building.

The issue Jesus presents to the eleven then gathered with him after dinner is, “People now know that you are my disciples because you are with me. How will they be able to tell that you are my disciples when I am no longer with you?”

The answer which he provides to the disciples, is that those who are followers of Christ will behave toward one another in a way so remarkable, that others will notice that they are different. Specifically, Jesus says that the standard to which his disciples are to be held – and therefore I submit the standard to which we are held – is that they, and we, must love one another, just as Jesus loved them and us. There is no mention of a capital campaign or a building fund.

In the fifteenth chapter of John, we hear the theme repeated: “¹² “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³ No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵ I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my

¹ *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. Nashville : Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989, S. Jn 13:34-35

Father. ¹⁶ You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. ¹⁷ I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.”²”

To lay down one’s life for one’s friends is a statement that says several things. It says that life is not all about self and making yourself happy or comfortable. “Laying down” in this sense means “putting aside” – it is the same idea as that expressed in “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Laying down your own life means putting someone else first.

To give up one’s life also may be something that is done literally. Jesus certainly did that for his disciples and for us. History and literature and on occasion the daily newspaper tell us stories of people we classify as heroes and to whom we sometimes give medals. They are people who sacrificed their lives so that others might live.

When you read about these folks, especially those in military units, you hear of the comradeship that existed among the members of a squad. The technical term is “unit cohesion,” – at the core it is not heroism, but friendship, and caring for one another that is being described.

Many people who are described as heroes reject the title. And they will often tell you, “I did only what the others would have done for me.”

We all know that this kind of sacrifice takes place right in the midst of our daily lives – it is what Jesus means in saying “love one another as I loved you.”

² *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. Nashville : Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989, S. Jn 15:12-17

How often have you heard a parent say, “we gave up lots of things so that the children could have what they needed”? Perhaps you did that yourself. I know that Gail and I have discussed times in our lives, when we felt we were giving up things for ourselves so that our children might have what we wanted for them. In some sense, we gave up our lives for our children. And so, I suspect, do most parents. This selflessness is not limited to parents of course. The thing about it is, laying aside our own needs for those of someone else, often seems to be the right thing to do.

Sometimes people give up trivial things, but their generosity in doing so is impressive. When I was about fourteen years old, I met a man many years my senior, who happened to be wearing a maroon-and-black-striped necktie. Having absolutely nothing else to say to this gentleman, I commented that maroon and black were my school’s colors.

“Well then,” he said, removing the tie from around his neck, “you should have this tie!” It was so startlingly easy, so without hesitation; and obviously it made an impression on me. I’m sure that George Jones had lots of other neckties, so giving up that particular one didn’t cause him any real distress. And in truth, I had lots of neckties myself. It wasn’t the tie, you see; it was the act of giving it up for someone else that had the impact.

And that is, I think, an important point to take with us today as we hear the words of Jesus, that we shall love one another as he has loved us.

We’re not called to enter into competition with one another to see which one of us can give the most. And this is not about giving money to the church, although that’s something we need to do. It’s about the awareness of self and others – and the connection of self to others.

All of the lessons of Easter season are leading up to Pentecost, the day on which The Church celebrates God's gift of the Holy Spirit to us. In the listing of the gifts of God, God the Father gives us life. God the Son gives us eternal life. And God the Holy Spirit gives us effective life, the capability to make a difference in the lives of others.

After this service, we're going to have a "sit down coffee hour." And we're going to talk about mission, about what we're doing to build Christ's Church in this place. Building up the Body of Christ, the capital-C Church, is about showing Christ's love for us in our love of others. It's not about having more Episcopalians or Baptists or Presbyterian. It's not about bringing people into this church, not in that sense of membership in a lower-case-C church, although that would be welcome.

Jesus calls us to love one another.

The first step in that process is for us to look inward. We have to see for ourselves the part of Christ that is within us. Only after having seen the Christ within us, can we respond to God's call on ourselves in relationship to others. Only in knowing ourselves can we come to love others. We have to start from a healthy and solid footing. You can't give up something – yourself – when you're not aware of what it is you're setting aside.

You can't give away a gift that you don't know you have. Finding that gift within us is sometimes not easy, and sometimes our gifts are not obvious. Seeing who God created in us – the person we were made to be – takes time and prayer and, yes, help from others on the journey. That is why church, lower-case c, is important, for it is here that we come to be fed for the journey.

We are messengers for God, carriers of the Holy Spirit, door-to-door sales people for Jesus. Our job is to show others that we love and follow Jesus. God will take care of what happens after that. It's exciting and joyous work, something that deserves our full and prayerful attention. It's something that we do outside these doors. It is the reason we are dismissed with the words "Go in peace" (meaning strength) "to love and serve the Lord."

You may know the post-communion prayer that some people say before leaving church. It is, "Blessed, praised and adored be Christ on his holy throne of glory. God grant us strength that the words we have said today with our lips, we may go forth to live in our lives."

The reward is far greater than a new necktie. The reward is everlasting life!