

An Excellence of Character

Wayne Waibel – 05/05/2024

The fourth Gospel speaks to us across the centuries. It speaks to the disciples directly as part of the Farewell Discourse prior to Christ's ultimate calling. And it speaks to the community of faith nearly three generations removed from His ministry on earth as that community struggles with Roman oppression and Jewish exclusion.

But the command to love remains the same. It is not only the glue that binds us; it is the prime directive to any who would be followers of the way. We are each called upon to resolve within ourselves that command, and the resultant obligation that it exacts – to lay down one's life for a friend.

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Peter, in Luke's accounting of the Acts of the Apostles proves a formidable opponent to the divine directive to embrace the Gentiles of his world. The excerpt from today's first reading informs the moment it finally coalesces within him. The Holy Spirit can be quite disruptive – particularly when we engage our personal bias. Proving once again that the Spirit's purposes are accomplished in spite of the boundaries constructed by humans.

The concept of inclusiveness in first century Palestine ran contrary to everything that was considered sacred. And Jesus was very specific in His command to love one another. There were no exceptions.

Fortunately, the gifts of the Holy Spirit increase as they are poured out. We like to think that we discovered the “pay it forward” movement, but humans have been benefiting from that ideal long before the drive-thru at McDonald’s, or Starbucks.

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What we’re up against these days are what passes for value on our various and sundry social platforms. Love as a theological virtue is an excellence of character that God has by nature, and in which we participate by grace. Such love is primarily interested in the good of the other person, rather than one’s own comfort.

The love we give is simply the love we have first received. “For whatever is born of God overcomes the world.” Our overcoming is not a detour around opposition, controversy, violence or even death. It is a faithful character formed through a careful response to the Spirit while we are in the crucible of trouble.

We must remember that Jesus announced his overcoming of the world as He was heading toward torture and death. This Christ pattern marks us. The faith that overcomes – that conquers – is not the faith that floats above the material demands of life. That faith, like the faith of Jesus, presses us to live for God at every moment – from our baptism to our death.

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Jesus did not die as an atonement for sins, but as the proof of God’s love for humanity. I know there are doctrines that specifically clarify just the opposite, and while I don’t mean to challenge those doctrines, I must also acknowledge that like Christ, the Spirit is not only true, it is truth.

And the truth is that Christian faith conquers the world not by military might or doctrinal arguments or coercion, but by love.

Genuine faith is rigidly connected with active love. The life of faith keeps expanding and deepening the meaning of Christ’s words. Abiding, loving, and keeping commandments are all bound up together in a mutual relationship. And that relationship becomes the embodiment of love as a command.

If the word command sounds harsh, because it implies words of force or power – as in a General commands his troops – perhaps we can soften it a bit by borrowing from the verbal root of the Hebrew word for command - mits'vah, which is – to direct one on a journey. For we are indeed on the road to eternity, and a command to love would be a most worthy travel companion.

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The new commands fulfill the old. Think of the new commands as the completion of the old - not the consumption of the old commands. They are not eliminated or superseded by the new – rather clarified. We participate in the ongoing life of Jesus in the world through the Spirit. The Son is begotten of the Father; so too are we born from above by the Spirit.

“These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full.” Jesus commands that we love one another not only for love’s sake, but that our joy may be full. And that joy will be made manifest in the joy of others.

The love that structures the inner life of God gives us a sense of the proper pattern for Christian love. Far from a feeling of euphoria, it is a disciplined habit of care and concern that, like all the virtues, can only be perfected over a lifetime.

And a life spent in the fulfillment of the command to love one another propagates exponentially and reverberates throughout the Cosmos until all else is overcome. The end result of this obedience to the command to love one another results in a friendship with God.

As Christ Himself alluded "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends. You are My friends if you do whatever I command you." This promise compels us to know the Risen Christ, and to know the Risen Christ is to know the heart of God. Amen.