

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

Sunday May 2, 2010

Easter 5C 2010

(Sermon delivered from notes – this is a recreation):

In the name of our one Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

We are closing in towards the end of Easter season – only two more Sundays to go. That being the case, I had to wonder why the lectionary takes us back to the upper room and the Last Supper? It is another reminder that Easter takes a while to sink in. That's why we spend 50 days thinking about its meaning for us today. Easter was confusing to the disciples also. It was and is a time of confusion and questions. Perhaps that's why we go back and reflect on what Jesus said and did.

Judas has just left the room to do what he intends and Jesus is about to begin his long farewell speech preparing his disciples for what is to come. Today's short Gospel lesson is the headliner for this long teaching sermon: **“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”**

Does anyone know where else this Gospel text is used in our services? That's right! It is read every Maundy Thursday, as we wash one another's feet as Jesus had just done. When else have heard this Gospel lesson read? Well, it is frequently read at the Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage. I think the use of this text on these two occasions give insight to the meaning of our lesson. We tend to think of “love” as a personal emotion we feel inside ourselves.- the warm fuzzies. It usually has affectional or even romantic undertones. Love today is considered a personal experience.

If you told that to any person in First Century Jerusalem, they wouldn't have a clue about

what you're talking about. The love Jesus is talking about is about attachment to another or to a group. The emotion is not separated from responsive action. It takes on the meaning of reliability in interpersonal relations – enduring mutual loyalty, mutual faithfulness. Looked at that way, it is an appropriate reading as servant leadership is acted out on Maundy Thursday and is certainly on point as preparation for the vows a couple is about to exchange. Here, Jesus is now taking the love each disciple has for him and redirects it towards each another. I find parents often do that when they are very ill or elderly. They worry about how to keep the family together after they have gone and they tend to focus the children's attention away from them and towards each other. Jesus is doing that here. I look at this commandment as the founding commandment for the Church that would emerge.

When I was talking about this lesson with the preschoolers at their chapel last Wednesday, one of the kids piped up, "Oh that's like the story we heard about the guy who got all busted up by the bad guys who robbed him and then a nice man on a donkey came and took care of him!" Not a bad summation of the Parable of the Good Samaritan by a four year old! She got the point that we are to love one another. The Samaritan who was reviled and hated by the Jews showed love and care for his enemy when he was victimized.

I don't know what the disciples heard or thought that evening. I don't know what they thought Jesus meant by his love for them or what he meant by "one another". If they were like most of us, when they heard "you" they probably thought "us" or "people like us". But after the crucifixion and Easter, it must have had a different meaning. Jesus' love, like the Good Samaritan's, extended even to those who were different, even to those who were his executioners.

In our lesson from the Book of Acts, we see Peter being faced with the challenge of encountering God's love being poured out onto people who weren't like him, people who he has been taught to have nothing to do with since they were "unclean" under the Law. Peter is being called on the carpet by the other disciples when he returns to Jerusalem from Caesarea and his

encounter with Cornelius and his household. Apparently the “coconut wireless” worked back then! Did you notice they didn’t criticize Peter for baptizing Cornelius and his household? No! They hadn’t even gotten that far! Right off the bat, they asked, “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” In other words, “What were you even doing there in the first place!” Peter repeats the story from Chapter 10 about his vision and tells of his seeing that “God gave the Gentiles the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?” Well, that seemed to do the trick and we have a short “happily ever after” ending.

Truth be told, we know that these suddenly happy ever after endings are usually too good to be true. The reality is that we as people and the Church as an institution have struggled mightily with the question, **“Who am I that I could hinder God.”** God, it seems, is in charge and will give love and acceptance to those whom we, for reasons of tradition or culture, would rather exclude. How we react is the question. The inclusion of the stranger, like the entry of a new person into the family, impacts and even changes all relationships and equilibriums. The issue is -- can the other be included without destroying our identity and the love we have for one another? The answer lies in (1) what we consider our essential core beliefs and relationships that give rise to our identity and (2) how firmly are we committed to one another when so challenged. That is what Jesus was talking about in his new commandment.

Every marriage has disagreements, fights and hurt feelings. Every family does also. It is true in political entities like nations and towns and it is true in churches. The question is how committed are we to one another to stay together. The closer the issue is to cultural divisions, the harder the command to love is. Slavery and racism tore this country and many churches apart. What are our essential unifying beliefs that give us our identity and how committed are we to stay together to differ while we work things out?

We have other challenges to staying together: the issue of acceptance of the former slaves

into the church: the worship wars about high versus low church, wrestling with modern biblical scholarship and how to read scripture, the moral ethics of segregation, and the inclusion of women into all orders of ministry. For the most part, we stuck together and worked out the answers over time. For some, each posed too much of a challenge to their identities and they broke from the church.

I think it was Karl Barth who said that a preacher should have the Scripture in one hand and the newspaper in the other. As a nation and, later as the Episcopal Church, we were able to fully include women as equal as members and in all positions of authority. As a church and as the State of Hawai'i we are challenged with the question of the equal and full inclusion of our gay brothers and sisters. Last Thursday, the State assembly passed HB444 providing for civil unions. It now goes to the Governor for her approval or veto or she can allow it to go into effect without her signature. We shall see.

This subject is the topic of sermons in many churches in Hawai'i this Sunday. It should be because it does go to our core beliefs and our commitment to one another. I apologize to those who are tired of hearing about the mere mention of the topic. However, I think we need reasoned and theologically grounded discussion of this topic.

The opposition to this bill was almost entirely based on religious beliefs and traditions. The issue of civil rights is thus not at all unconnected from whether we see God's gift of love and Spirit in gay and lesbian people and working in and through their lives. Can we see the Spirit working in their lives and that they experience the same gifts others have been given by God? Can we include them without losing our identity as a community? Different faith traditions have reached different conclusions on that. The Episcopal Church has struggled with this for over 30 years. For more than a generation, we have had open discussion of this issue. For the most part, we held together in our commitment to one another over those decades while the

church changed its position from open hostility to “don’t ask, don’t tell” and finally to full inclusion in all orders of ministry. That final step was too much for about 3% of churches who have formed a new denomination since it threatened their identities. I accept their decision even as I grieve over it.

The churches in Hawai’i are not of one mind over HB444. At our Diocesan Convention last October the issue of supporting HB444 came up and a vote by orders was demanded by opponents as provided in our canons. Over 80% of clergy and almost 75% of the lay delegates voted to support the bill. We are joined by many UCC, Methodist, Presbyterian and other churches as well as the Reform and Conservative rabbis.

I respect the right of others to disagree, especially the 20% of our clergy and 25% of our lay delegates. This parish is as committed to them as we hope they are to us, our differences on this issue notwithstanding.

There are many Christian churches that disagree with us. I will name them here, not to denigrate them but because they have been so vocal and visible in their opposition to HB444. The most organized and vocal opposition was led by the Roman Catholic Church, many fundamentalist evangelical churches and the Mormons. I respect their right to voice their opinions in the public square. I note that these religious bodies have more hierarchical or “top-down” forms of governance and are also the most opposed to the leadership of women in their churches. Those may be coincidences. I think not. However, we can disagree with them on those issues also and still consider them churches with whom we can do common ministry for the good of the community.

We have to live in the world we live in and try to make sense of it. We have to seek to see what God is doing. We have to accept challenges and changes and think theologically about them. We have to accept the work we have been given to do and be willing to be open and ask

questions and be committed to hang together while we search for answers.

Well, that little seven-sentence Gospel lesson has yielded a long enough sermon. Who am I to hinder God? I'd like to close with a poem that best expresses my usual position. Edwin Markham, a member of the Disciples of Christ, wrote it in the late 1800's:

He drew a circle that shut me out-

Rebel, heretic, thing to flout;

But love and I had the wit to win -

We drew a circle that took him in.

AMEN.