

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after Easter
May 15, 2022 Yr C
St. Michael's Episcopal Church
The Reverend Canon Michael J. Horvath
Gospel: John 13:31-35

I was listening to an interview of Robin Wall Kimmerer, the American scientist and botanist. If you have not read her books, I recommend that you do, especially her 2013 book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Dr. Kimmerer is also a member of the indigenous Potowatomi Nation. In the course of this interview, she was sharing the wisdom of her ancestors about the way they approach “social circles” and human relationships. Instead of viewing our society in terms of concentric circles, in which we view ourselves as the center and then work out from there, the view of American indigenous peoples is that we are the beginning and ending of endless, overlapping circles, right down to relationships we have with plants and animals, and by extension, the entire world.

This kind of worldview is not particular to the Potowatomi Nation. In fact, Buddhism teaches this very same concept, known as “interconnectedness” or “interbeing”. As the Buddhist teacher, Thich Nhat Hahn says, “There are...no solitary beings. The whole planet is one giant, living, breathing cell, with all its working parts linked in symbiosis.” The Chinese wisdom tradition of Taoism teaches that we are individually integral parts of a greater whole. An understanding of this sense of wholeness allows us to function in a manner that promotes balance and harmony internally as well as on a larger scale.

And indeed, even if you don't know anything about Buddhism or Taoism, we know from popular culture that these world religions view the world this way. American society tends to take a very skeptical view of Buddhist, Eastern philosophical and American Indigenous teachings as “touchy-feely”, kumbaya, crunchy or granola. What is all this interconnectedness about? We're a secular meritocracy and the best rise to the top, dog eat dog, all for one and all for one, etc. And then there are us Christians.

I was recently at a luncheon where I was sitting next to a very charming Chinese woman who follows Taoist wisdom teachings in the way she lives her life. She was very clear about her life being part of a larger stream of being; that her actions and inactions had a direct effect on every other being in the world. At one point she turned to me and said “Do you know what the problem is with Christianity? Christians are self-centered!” It was a generalization that I've heard before, so I never take it personally, but I started to wonder why there is such a disconnect between Jesus's words in the Gospel reading today and how Christians are sometimes viewed by the world at large.

Today, we are at Jesus's last meal with his disciples. Judas has just left to betray him, and I can't help but feel that Jesus is feeling the desperation of his situation. He wants to distill his ministry to its very essence. And that essence is love. “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another,” Jesus says. “Love one another.”

Soon Jesus will be gone and what will his followers have to bind themselves to one another in his absence? Love. It was the primary binding agent that Jesus had for each of his followers from day one. And what Jesus is saying at this last meal is that the love that Jesus calls us to have for one another will be the make or break of our lives together.

And what exactly is this love of which Jesus speaks? Jesus is not talking about romantic, passionate love for a spouse or partner (known in Greek as *eros*), and he is not speaking of a love that is based on friendship, social ties, book clubs or family relationships (known in Greek as *philia*). There's nothing wrong with those kinds of love – they help create loving, committed relationships with partners and spouses, and in the setting of family and friends is where we usually first learn how to give and receive love.

Today Jesus is speaking of the love known as Agapé. Agapé is the Greek term for love that refers to the self-sacrificing love of God for humanity, which Jesus and his disciples were committed to reciprocating and practicing towards God and among one another. This is more than being friendly or being good neighbors. This is selfless love that is passionately committed to the well-being of others, and it is much more expansive than friends and family and neighbors.

We have all heard of the phrase “charity begins at home”. This phrase has been incorrectly interpreted by some folks, based on a passage in Paul's letter to the Galatians, that we must look out for Christians first, even exclusively. This sentiment has been the basis of global wealth sharing and distribution, the basis of inclusion or exclusion into the halls of government and power, and the basis of colonial domination of countries and nations, the effects of which are still with us today.

And perhaps that is what people see when they encounter institutionalized Christianity and our church communities. Perhaps that was what the lovely Chinese woman at lunch was getting at. If a family member or close friend came to us asking for assistance, we are likely happy to give it. If a church member we know well needs some help or if a committee is meeting, we make time in our lives to respond. Those circles are well taken care of. We feel responsible towards and care for people in those circles. But get beyond those circles to people outside of our church, or even our neighborhood, and our interest falls, our schedules are suddenly too busy. We don't know them; their lives don't touch ours.

What Jesus tells us, indeed what Dr. Kimmerer, the Buddha and Lao Tzu (the founder of Taoism) tell us, is that we can't stop at our own self-imposed limits, catering to people in circles we only feel comfortable in. Ninety percent of Jesus's ministry was with people he didn't know – the boy possessed by demons, the woman who had been hemorrhaging for twelve years, the 5000 people he fed with a few baskets of loaves and fishes, the healing of the paralyzed man, are a few examples.

Agapé love that Jesus call us to today calls us to move beyond the circles that we protect ourselves within, to understand the fullness of our interconnectedness and to act on that understanding. We are called to embody and enact this kind of love not when it is suitable for us, or when our schedules allow or when the stars are in alignment and all our ducks are in a row. We are called to love in this way as part of our daily lives because our very existence, which is as intertwined with the person sitting next to you as closely as it is intertwined with the victims of the mass shooting in Buffalo, New York last night, depends on it.

I truly believe that the vitality of churches and faith communities are directly tied to how closely they commit themselves to this Agapé, self-sacrificing-type love. And if the decline of church membership over the last 30 years is an indication, and as the view of Christianity as an institutional force for good, justice and compassion wanes, then it seems to me that Christians have done a poor job of following Jesus's command to love one another. Our circles are getting smaller and the disconnect between Jesus's words and how we live them out is getting wider and wider.

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another, Jesus says at the end of today's Gospel reading. I think a better, clearer, faithful translation for us is this: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have selfless, universal love and concern for the welfare of others, near or far." Amen.