

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you ... love one another."

I think it was Mark Twain that I first saw quoted, saying that it was not the things in the Bible that he didn't understand that bothered him, but the things that he did understand. If it wasn't Mark Twain, it should have been, and whether he said it or not, certainly a lot of us have felt exactly that, whether we have explicitly articulated it or not.

It's not the things that we don't grasp in the Bible that are the problem, though sometimes we would like to make out that they are the problem.

Sometimes we would like to pretend that the real issue is that we haven't adequately grasped the full significance of Jesus' words to us, and so it only makes sense to hold off until we do: maybe until we understand the Virgin Birth or the Resurrection or why there is suffering in the world.

Where the problem lies is not in what we don't understand but in what we do - most plainly the problem lies in this fundamental command - love one another!

From time to time I wrestle with the meaning of this command and I sometimes feel that the church might never have really grasped this command!

That's funny, isn't it, because Jesus said it so often. 'Love one another. Even as I have loved you, so you must love one another'. 'By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, that you love one another', etc., etc.

Maybe that's why Jesus said it so often, because he knew we'd have trouble absorbing it - 'love one another'?

The mission of the Church is to demonstrate God's love in the way we live our lives! How we complicate mission through our various programmes and make it into something that requires loads of protocol and strategies. Sometimes we really need to get back to basics. "Love as I have loved you" says Jesus!

All of us would like to see more people coming to Church on Sundays – why don't they? Yes, things are different now: work patterns, Sunday is a day for hobbies etc etc! I believe that an underlying reason for lack of interest in coming to Church is because generally people don't feel loved or valued by many who call themselves Christians.

I believe there is a connection here between loving and believing that Jesus is the Christ. When we put our trust in Jesus, we experience God's love, which makes us "God-begotten" people, or as the Gospel of John puts it, in Christ we are "born again." Because we are "God-begotten" we are children of God, and since "everyone who

loves the parent, loves the child,” when we are in Christ, we love the children of God. That means, we’re family!

Now, all of this works well in the abstract, but we know that family relationships aren’t always loving ones. We have our disagreements. Sometimes they’re serious disagreements. Churches divide. So do denominations that make unity their polar star. Just because we’re family doesn’t mean we have this love-thing all pat. Therefore, and there always seems to be a “therefore,” Judith Lieu points out in her commentary on this letter that “the horizontal relationship is always mediated through God.” We love one another not because we recognize each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. We love each other because God is at work in our midst, transforming us into children of God, which enables us to love one another

In the Acts of the Apostles, we see our Christian Church in its earliest, most perfect and probably most idealized form. There were no buildings, doctrines, vestments, or rituals; just the power of the Holy Spirit giving the preached Word of God the power to transform death into life, making the lost found, the captive free, the lame to walk, the blind to see, and giving the hopeless hope.

For whom is the gift of the Holy Spirit intended: some or all? And to whom are we, if fortunate enough to have received the gift of God’s Spirit, going to give it: some or all? In the book of the Acts of the Apostles, we hear preaching that explodes the myth of us and them and we and they. We are they!

Our passage from Acts begins, “and while Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word.” To understand the full impact of Peter’s message we must take account of how the Holy Spirit had revealed to Peter that God’s love was for all people. At the beginning of the chapter, we hear of Cornelius, a Roman soldier of rank, prestige, and honour. He would have been, to the faithful and observant Jew, which includes Simon Peter, a person of derision, maybe disgust, and probably hatred for participating in the oppression of Israel and the economic exploitation of the people so as to provide for the glories of Rome. So, Peter will be quite surprised when God makes it clear that Cornelius is loved by God, too, and there is nothing that Peter can do about it.

Shortly before God arranges an introduction of Peter to Cornelius, God gives the well-meaning-yet-often-befuddled Peter a vision of a four-cornered sheet full of animals that would make Peter unclean if he even touched them, much less ate them. Peter may not follow the rules, but he certainly knows them. Peter is told to “kill and eat” Peter refuses but is told “What God has made clean, you shall not call unclean”!

Cornelius was a supporter of the Jews and receives a message from the Spirit to send for Simon Peter and so the righteous circumcised Jew meets the unclean Gentile Cornelius.

Then the clean Peter meets the unclean Cornelius. God has made Cornelius, too, and it is not for Peter to call him profane. In God's economy, the lost are just as much God's as the found. Clearly, as the Acts of the Apostles makes abundantly clear, the ones who are being saved by Christ are not to stand still waiting for the lost to come to them. Peter has been sent to Cornelius, not the other way around.

Peter preaches a sermon that begins with his revelation from God that God truly shows no favouritism and goes on to stress the marvellous things of Christ's resurrection and our reading from Acts today begins with the effect of that sermon "While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word."

Cornelius and his unclean cohorts receive the gospel message with abandon, and the Holy Spirit pours in and blows through their unclean lives just as surely as the Spirit does ours. The circumcised believers, as Acts 10:45 tells us, "were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles."

Every time the verb "astound" or the noun "astonishment" shows up in scripture, pay close attention, because chances are there is an example of God acting in our lives as God wants, not as we want God to act.

Peter finishes his sermon directed not at the ones being converted, but to the smug and certain who already think that their Christian faith and forgiveness by God makes them privileged over others. "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?"

The Church is but a few days old, yet the congregants are already complaining among themselves, conspiring to send a letter to their equivalent to the Presbytery or Principal Clerk or equivalent Bishop or Synod, complaining that even the Gentiles are welcome "yes the gentiles, can you believe such a thing?"

We can almost hear them saying, "Who is sitting in my pew?" And "I am all for inclusion, as long as we don't lower our musical standards." We are not the hosts at God's table; we are guests ourselves. We aren't called to welcome as much as to act like we have been welcomed ourselves into the grace of God. We don't forgive the sins of others; we testify that our sins have been forgiven. We are all beggars hungry for the bread of God, telling the other beggars where the bread may be found.

Jesus made it all quite simple: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”

Too many Christians believe that we are called simply to believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and that when we achieve that belief, it somehow separates us from those who don't. We fall into the sin of believing that we are clean, and those who don't believe are unclean.

But as the philosopher Kierkegaard observed, ‘Christianity is not a doctrine to be taught, but a life to be lived.’

Are we called to believe in resurrection, and teach it as doctrine, or are we called to practice resurrection in the life that we live?

Jesus instructs that we are to practice resurrection when he says, “Love one another as I have loved you.”

We go astray when the Risen Christ is worshipped but not followed. To love one another is a call to action, modelled on Jesus' love for the disciples. For the people with whom we are called to share the Good News of the resurrection, their future in the faith is often dependent on our ability to practice resurrection and not just preach it.

To practice resurrection with the very substance of our lives will be a constant expansion of our capacity to love. Jesus said, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for his friends.”

“We are one in the Spirit.  
We are one in the Lord.  
We are one in the Spirit.  
We are one in the Lord.  
And we pray that all unity.  
May one day be restored.  
And they'll know we are Christians.  
By our love, By our love.”

“This is my command” says Jesus “that you love one another”