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Sermon – Year B Easter 5
‘We love because he loved us first.’
May 2, 2021

In the name of God who made us, saved us, and sustains us, AMEN.

‘We love because he loved us first.’

One of those funny things that I’ve had to do as a graduating senior is to apply for a post-grad job. It turns out that the fever dream of college life doesn’t last forever, and we eventually have to go out into the real world. I think it was right before his college graduation that the Apostle Paul decided he needed to ‘put an end to childish ways’.

As part of the job hunt, I had a chat with two junior employees who would be working at the firm that I was considering. One of the questions I asked them was about how I would be assessed in my role, and what sort of pressure there would be from my supervisors to perform. Their response was one of those mini-wake up calls that you get from time to time as someone who’s growing up. They let me know that it’s not school – I’m not getting graded. Everyone there knows it’s going to take time to get up to speed, and it’s fine to get things wrong. Having spent my whole life in academic settings, I had never considered how much I frame everything in terms of being graded. If I’m not being assessed (either by myself or by someone else) any endeavour that I undertake seemingly has no meaning.

We just heard one of the most vivid descriptions of that relationship of love which enjoins us as human beings with the Divine. Jesus tells us, ‘I am the vine, you are the branches.’ Just like a vine is linked to its branches by being part of the same body, so too are we enjoined in Christ’s body through his incarnation, and in Jesus’ death and resurrection. When Jesus says that he abides *in* us, he really means it – he shares in our very humanity, and calls us to share in his divinity. This is the beauty of the divine experience, that just as Jesus abides in his Father, so too can we abide in him.

In his sermon last Sunday, Kevin asked us to consider the question - 'What have we done to deserve God's love?' The answer was that God loves us all unconditionally *because of who we are*.

Yet in the Gospel reading for today, we hear that as branches we are called to 'bear fruit', lest we 'wither' and get gathered up, 'thrown into the fire', and 'burned'. I think that reading the passage growing up, and even reading it earlier this week, I've read it through an academic lens. I had the image of God as a great examiner, grading us on how much fruit we bear. And the last thing you'd want is to get an F.

However, in further meditating on all of the lessons for today, I think there might be a more nuanced way to think of Jesus' call to 'bear fruit'. I think the reading from 1 John brings out what I think is so beautiful about our relationship with God through Christ Jesus in a particular clarity. What if God's love for us is so beautiful, so warming, so fulfilling, that we just can't help but share in it as much as we can? What if it's the kind of thing that once we first experience it, we just can't help but getting more?

I think that this is a different approach to bearing fruit than the one I had at first. In abiding in Jesus, we merely respond to Jesus' own abiding in us. Therefore, rather than striving to produce something of ourselves for which we will be scored, all Jesus asks from us is that we open up our hearts to that which he has already given us. 1 John puts it so clearly - 'We love because he first loved us.' God is already abiding in us. We just to have the humility to accept it.

How do we go about doing this? None of us have ever seen God, so how are we supposed to open ourselves up to God's love? Again, 1 John is clear. In fact, there are _ little samples of God's love and grace on this very Zoom call. '... if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.'

Therefore dearly beloved, in heeding Jesus' call to abide in him as he abides in us, Jesus is calling us to abide in him as he abides in *all* of us. This is nothing new for ECY, it is who we are as a

ministry on this campus and in this city. Our practice of an ‘extravagant, radical welcome’ isn’t just about filling the pews – it’s a recognition that we were first loved and that everyone with whom we come in contact is in their own way a beacon of that same love of God. In living into and opening our hearts to God’s love, Jesus calls us to notice the ways in which that love flows through us and through all the many branches of that one true vine.

As a member of ECY, I’ve been blessed to taste and see first-hand the unique and diverse ways in which God’s love flows through everyone in this ministry - students, young adults, and not-so-young adults. Like a great symphony, each person in this ministry opens their heart in their own way that complements, supports, and enriches the hearts around them. In a turbulent and difficult year, this has been the community (rather, *family*) that I’ve been able to turn to for that ‘perfect love’ that ‘casts out fear’.

And in our season of transition as a ministry, I want to suggest that this is the core of who we are at ECY, and whom God’s calling us to be going forward. As ministers of God’s love, we each have a calling to recognize what we can do to make each person in our midst feel that love in the ways that their soul needs, while not losing sight of our own claim to God’s love. Just as Philip recognized, it is a call to respond to the Spirit’s yearning for us to recognize and affirm God’s love in everyone with whom we come in contact, regardless of their nationality, or their ethnic or sexual identities. And we do this while remembering our own Baptismal covenant and our commitment to justice, peace, and the dignity of every human being.

We probably won’t get it right all the time, and maybe we won’t always be able to embody that ‘perfect love’. But remember the nuance – we’re not doing this for a score, but as a response to that which we have already received. In God’s eyes, the times when we fall short as ministers of God’s love aren’t knocks against us, but opportunities to respond to God’s love in a more

wholesome way. For ECY, these are opportunities to learn, adapt, and respond to the new and ever-changing ways in which Jesus is calling us to be conduits of love on this campus and in this city.

And so as the seniors and I get ready for the Spirit of the Lord to snatch us away from this place like Philip, and as she snatches away one of the brightest beacons of God's love in our chaplain Paul, I leave you with this verse from one of my favourite hymns –

Here might I stay and sing,
No story so divine;
Never was love, dear King,
Never was grief like Thine.
This is my Friend,
In whose sweet praise
I all my days
Could gladly spend.

And as we go into reflection rooms, I invite you to reflect on the new ways we've learned to love one another over the past year, and how we can continue these going forward.