

Rev. Dr. Rebecca L. Kiser
Staying Connected with God - Love will Show
5/2/2021 Easter 5B COMMUNION

So if we're reading from John's gospel and the 1st letter from John to churches, you gotta know we're going to be talking about love! In John, God and faith are all about love - God's love for all creation, creation's longing for God to set things right, God's love for us shown uniquely in coming to us in Jesus, our love for God shown through our love for Jesus, God's love for everyone in the world, our love for each other in the world. Love as the greatest and most enduring value and aspect of God - God IS love. What love looks like from God and what love of God looks like from us, and what our love of neighbor looks like. God's love, which came first before our love and evoked our love, kindled our love - this is the defining characteristic of the whole Christian lifestyle.

I'm starting a new series of sorts - looking for how to define the Christian lifestyle, what practices and values characterize the life of a person who has responded to Christ and now has become the very temple of God because God's spirit lives within them. Following Christ, which is what we do, we who have responded to the invitation are called to walk in his ways. Following Christ becomes our life-defining belief, the source of our understanding of who we are, what we're here for, what we do, what we hold as vital, and how we understand our whole purpose of living.

I've been looking for a good, solid word to try and express this. A seminary type word would be praxis, which is a fancy way of saying practical theology - the acting out of our beliefs, or the way our faith is shown in our living. I'm drawn to this practical theology, this praxis. It seems to me that we spend a lot of time learning details about Bible characters and how to say all the doctrines of Christianity - learning the right words like incarnation and resurrection and baptism and salvation and atonement and worship and prayer and trust and giving our life to Jesus.... So many fights within Christian history have been about right beliefs and the wordings of theological concepts, like whether one "believes" in predestination or the correct fundamentals or speaking in tongues or whatever.

I think we need more attention to the practice of living as a Christian, the resulting praxis of having acknowledged God's love towards us, God's loving presence in the world, God's passionate love for the infinite variations of life, God's gracious seeking of the restoring of relationships with humans - healing the brokenness of that relationship, and bringing us back to our ultimate purposes and understandings of life, including God's self-revelation through Jesus

and the offering once again of this forgiveness and restoration. If indeed we are following Christ, will these loving ends not also be our characterizations?

How can it be that folks who speak the words of faith on a Sunday can verbally abuse another Christian on Tuesday, and feel no chagrin or responsibility? How can a person who affirms faith on Sundays go to work and cheat their employees? How can those of us who say we've accepted the love of Christ while at church, go on to discriminate against and even hate people who are different from themselves? How could Christians accept slavery or be so carried away in their anger as to commit domestic violence? How can people living within the love of God not care about the very real suffering and needs of the poor around us? And accept a society that condones injustices?

Yes, living our faith as a citizen of heaven and being a citizen of the world at the same time is complicated. Our sinfulness and the culture of what Jesus calls "the world" cling around us, and often we can't even see it - except little by little as the Spirit opens our eyes. Things we've accepted as "the way things are" are often unexamined, and just taken on. Ways of our family and our culture are just accepted as how people act, or how government works, or the reality of the world's inequalities.

Being a Christ-follower can get reduced to a simple following of church customs, a comfortable practice of faith that doesn't interfere too much in our living within our communities, being good citizens, being rather conservative in our morality, and rather sentimental about the way things were in the past, saying a few prayers and knowing some facts about the stories in the Bible.

I ask myself, how often have I wrestled with the strong pull of temptation and really had to fight through it to do what God has asked? How often have I felt the injustice of racism being expressed by my friends, and found the strength to speak out against it? How often do I think about systemic poverty, and just give some money to a cause to ease my conscience, and not be moved by the whole picture of injustice? How often have I cried in prayer for the damaged testimony of the church when leaders and members show the world a face of hate and discrimination? How often have I shrugged my shoulders at the hunger and suffering of people around the world and thought, "Well, there's not much I can really do anyway?" Does my faith in God, and the love born in me as a follower of Christ, cause me to question my living?

The gospel of Jesus, and his call to follow the ways of God's realm while living here on earth, are still as radical a change from 'the way things are' as they ever were. The message of God still confronts ways of greed, manipulation, hate, self-interest, pride, power over others,

inequalities - all those things. Most of us try to make serving God fit in with our culture without making too much racket...and put up with the disparity.

John's gospels and other writings challenge us by taking the love of God for us, and our love back, as a fundamental of the understanding of faith, and the guiding principle of the practice of faith.... The basis for all our living, all our values, all our actions - is love. Love is the characteristic that will set us apart and show who we follow, as love guides our actions. John says this is SO basic as to faith, that if we can't love others who we CAN see, then he questions how we can love God who we CAN'T see. If we have indeed responded to the love of God in our deepest being, that love will fill us and overflow to all around us. We will feel others' pain, as God feels ours. We will care what happens to each other, as God cares what happens to us. We will seek to help people heal and be fed and clothed and loved, as God seeks to restore us to healing and well-being. God's love for our right-living will carry over into our love for right living, God's passion for justice will become our passion. According to John's writing, if this isn't the case for us, he questions our true following of the Christ.

If the God of love has come to dwell in this temple of my body, then God's love will be reflected in all that I do. So I ask myself, how is this love between me and God going? God's love for me is deep and constant - how is my love for God? Like any relationship, sometimes we have to take stock. And like any relationship, there are stages of growth and understanding, hopefully a deepening of what it means to love that other person as we discover more of who they are, and as we go through thick and thin with them.

We are mortal humans, and our minds and understandings are finite - although our insights can grow. Our sinfulness gets around our ankles and trips us up, limits our understanding. Our desires for things that are less than ultimate, glittery things that catch our attention - these grab our attention away from love for God. We are uniquely blind to our own problems and issues, which cloud the eyes of our hearts. We all have places that need healing, which can keep us from totally being embraced by God's love. Like human relationships, we may get past the early passion of wanting to know more, see more, be with more - and begin to rather take things for granted the way they are, ignoring or overlooking those places that pinch.

So what does being a Christ-follower look like? Well, we are each distinct persons, with different gifts, different insights, different personalities, so we can assume not all of us will be identical. HOWEVER, we will all have in common this very basic love for God and love for others: love will be the basis for our motivation and our actions. I think that's why Jesus so often chose children to illustrate that kind of deep immersion in love for God - because

children's love is so basic, so embedded in who they are, so joyous and connected. (At least in healthy families and until life wounds them.....)

A preacher at a funeral I attended this past week praised the deceased for her Christian lifestyle. I hadn't thought of Christianity in terms of a lifestyle, but that term has been sitting with me and I kind of like it as a further way to explain what praxis is. Her theology showed in her lifestyle; her belief in God was illustrated in the values of her life. A Christian lifestyle is one of love - compassion, kindness, long-suffering, patience - all those things that are called the fruit of the Spirit. Rejoicing in another's good, not envying, not striving to be better than another except in showing love... sharing of resources, peaceable, kindly in words and not better, not indulging in anger, not hoarding things for oneself alone, caring for another in pain, desiring the best for each other, their healing, their wholeness and shalom. And extending this kind of love far beyond the normal boundaries of family or tribe of those like us - redefining kin and family to include all persons - and offering the same to them, despite how we are treated in return. It is a sacrificial love - not a doormat love, because we are centered first in our worth to God, our love from God, our own healing in God. God-like love gives itself away, restores broken relationships; in the end it considers the other's need as more important than its own and can give away even one's own comfort.

And it all starts, as John tells us, from God's love - which is all of those things we've mentioned. God's love is the first, and our love is a response; God's love is the prime mover, and our love grows in its light. So I'll leave us with the question I've been asking myself: how is the love between me and God? And what does the love between me and others show of my love for God? AMEN.