

North Kildonan United Church

15th May 2022 ~Rev. Don Johnson

Acts 11: 36-43

Revelation 21: 1-6

John 13: 31-35

Gracious God, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that we may hear your Word with joy. Amen.

One of the outstanding features of Westworth United Church is the great east window that fills the space at the front of their sanctuary. It was the creation of Leo Mol, a work of art like his window that graces our sanctuary and those other churches fortunate enough to possess one of his pieces.

The Westworth east window is a work on a grand scale. I have no idea of the actual proportions but it is an impressive window that demands your attention as soon as you enter the sanctuary.

The focus of that window at Westworth is the passage from John's gospel just before this morning's reading. Jesus and the disciples are gathered around the table and the last stages of his earthly life are being played out. Jesus had washed the feet of his disciples, teaching about the nature of the kingdom of God as he does so. Then as they sit at table, Jesus declares that one of them will betray him, the one who receives a piece of bread from him. Judas receives the bread and Jesus says to him: "Do quickly what you are going to do." Judas goes out, and this is where our gospel lesson begins today: *"When Judas had gone out, Jesus said..."*

In the Westworth window, however, Judas doesn't dash out the door right away. You see him off to one side, sitting alone, his head in his hand, with a look of sadness and remorse and regret on his face. Here is Judas the betrayer, cut off from the rest of his friends, cut off from the community he knew and from which he drew his life's meaning and purpose, cut off by his own doing, betraying the only one who could ever love him so fully, so completely. Cut off from everything, merely for some pieces of silver.

In the gospel account, Judas immediately walks away from Jesus and the disciples, walks away to continue his betrayal.

As the gospel says, it was night, a time of physical darkness but also an indication of the darkness of the moment. Before our reading, we have the darkness of the betrayal by Judas. After our reading, Jesus foretells that Peter will deny Jesus three times. Between these two events, Jesus talks of his return to God, a journey the disciples cannot make, but Jesus also gives instructions about how his followers are to live in the new reality which is about to open up.

In the midst of the night of his betrayal and the warning of Peter's denial, Jesus offers hope and new life. After his death and resurrection, life will be different for his

followers, and as the gospel spreads, different for the world. And the driving force, the unifying word will be love, love that the followers of Jesus have for one another.

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

It is a new commandment, new because it is based on the love Jesus has for us. This love is not a philosophical virtue to be debated, nor is it the sentimental emotion of greeting cards and pop music. Jesus is the distinctive definition of love.

So what kind of love should they have for one another? Jesus is about to be tried, tortured and executed. The love of which he speaks has to be strong enough to carry his followers, his friends, through hell and back. Nothing romantic here, nothing nice and sweet and syrupy, nothing selective – I’ll only love the ones I like. The love of Jesus is a costly love – a love to the point of his own death in fact; a self-sacrificing, all-encompassing painful love. A love that puts the other first, ahead of one’s own needs or wants, a love that transcends family needs and community limitations. A love that is put into action for the sake of others.

One of the distinctive marks of the early church was how the followers of Jesus loved each other and didn’t hesitate to show that love in their deeds of caring and generosity. Their non-Christian neighbours would comment on how these Christians loved each other.

And what of us today, the successors of thousands of years of Christian faith and teaching? If we have anything to offer this self-obsessed, suspicious, fearful world, a world of Judas-like betrayers, a world where human work and dignity are sacrificed for profit and gain, where human life is little valued and the human spirit is tested and broken, if we have anything counter-cultural at all to offer, it is love. A love that reflects the love Christ has for us, a love that eases the burdens and lifts up the downtrodden, a love that cries out for justice and fair play, a love that says: *“welcome friend, come and join us, there is plenty enough for all.”* A love that cares for us when we are ill, rejoices with us when we are happy, forgives us when we make mistakes, takes us seriously when we doubt ourselves.

Now sometimes, just sometimes we are able to do that. Sometimes, not always, we are able to love with the heart of Jesus. Not always, not easily, not consistently, so the command that Jesus has given us takes our time, our work, our energy, our compassion. And perhaps most importantly, it takes our imagination. Love one another. The simplest, clearest and hardest command of all.

“Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” Love is the distinguishing mark of the church, and every so often the outside community catches glimpses of that love, that faith in action.

Our reading from the book of the Acts of the Apostles offers us a glimpse of the inclusive love of God for us and for all the world.

In our reading, Peter receives a vision of a sheet being lowered from heaven, containing creatures understood to be ritually unclean. A voice encourages Peter to make a meal of these birds and reptiles and animals. Peter is shocked: “By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.” The voice answers Peter: “What God has made clean; you must not call profane.” Later in the reading the Holy Spirit moved Peter to understand that the gift of Jesus Christ is for all people, including the Gentiles.

This is an interesting text, actually it’s a crucial yet fairly unknown text. On the surface it is talking about putting aside the kosher laws of Judaism but it is much more profound than that. The key sentence is “What God has made clean; you must not call profane.”

We are made clean through the sacrament of Holy Baptism. Yet down through the years many baptised Christians have been rejected from the church because of their sexual orientation, or their political views, or being divorced, or having children out of wedlock, and sadly the list goes on, a list containing so much the church has to repent for.

In particular, when the debates of the 1980s were going on around the ordination of gay and lesbian candidates for ministry, this passage from Acts was one of the strongest encouraging words of scripture for those in favour.

As was said in those days, and of course holds true today, at baptism the sexual orientation of the candidate is never asked nor is it in the least bit significant. All are invited to come to the waters of baptism equally loved by God and equally accepted by God. As the voice said to Peter: “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”

Based then on the inclusive love of Christ shown at baptism, how then could a candidate be refused ordination based solely on their orientation. The world may reject a person because of discrimination, societal narrowness and just plain hate, but God welcomes all people to the family of God, and declares all clean through Holy Baptism.

It’s been a long while since we have had a baptism here, so I want to remind you of the words I use before the actual act of baptism. The text comes to us from the Church of Scotland and is used for infant, child or adult.

*For you, Jesus Christ came into the world;
for you he lived and showed God’s love;
for you he suffered the darkness of Calvary
and cried at the last, ‘It is accomplished’;
for you he triumphed over death and rose to newness of life;
for you he ascended to reign at God’s right hand.
All this he did for you, before you knew anything of it.
And so the word of Scripture is fulfilled:*

'We love because God loved us first.'

And we might add: "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."

Let's end with a few words from Julian of Norwich, words which reflect an aspect of our calling to love one another, words that show us how to put love in action that I suggest needs to be practiced by all of us.

She writes:

*No one listens, they tell me, and so I listen...
and I tell them what they have just told me,
and I sit in silence listening to them, letting them grieve.
"Julian, you are wise," they say, "you have been gifted with
understanding."
All I did was listen.
For I believe full surely
that God's spirit is in us all...*

Amen.