

“Everything Is Holy: Our Relationships”

John 13:31-34

This is an exciting time in our lives. We are rediscovering the power of community and of being together. We are gathering once more with friends and family for meals, worship, and events and it is a deep joy to be able to do that. Last week while on vacation, we met an artist by the name of Christine Tisa. This was at the farmer’s market where she displays a part of her art close to her home and art studio. As we started talking and admiring her art, she invited us to her studio to look at more paintings. As we oohed and aahed over her work, she then invited us to see more in her home. We ended up spending close to two hours with Christine and visiting pretty much every inch of her home. We learned about her travels to Costa Rica, her training to be a yoga instructor, her art teaching, and her service on the vestry of the local Episcopal church. We loved every minute of this experience as such encounters had been curbed by COVID restrictions for the last 16 months. We made a new friend and discovered that we had so many experiences in common. Such experiences affirm to me how our lives are always enriched and expanded by our relationships.

In his book, *Blue Print: The Evolutionary Origins of a Good Society*, doctor and sociologist Nicholas Christakis uses two shipwrecks as examples of what happens when we cooperate with each other. Christakis looked at two shipwrecks in New Zealand: the Grafton and the Invercauld, both wrecked on the same island within four months of each other in 1864. They were similar in many ways, but their outcomes were very different. The Grafton had all the crew members survive, while the Invercauld crew did not. When the Grafton wrecked, the 5-member crew worked together to save the life of a sick crewmate. The Invercauld, had only 3 of their 19-member crew survive. The big difference in outcome was the result of cooperation or the lack of it. The Grafton crew cooperated for two years while the crew of the other ship did not.

Christakis says, “For too long, in my view...scientists and citizens on the street have focused on the dark side of human nature, on our propensity for selfishness and tribalism and mendacity and cruelty and violence, as if this were a natural or normal or primary state of affairs. And yet, I think the bright side has been denied the attention it deserves, because equally, we are capable of love and friendship and teaching and cooperation and all these other wonderful things. And in fact, I would argue that it’s those qualities that are more powerful than the bad qualities and therefore, in some ways, much more important.

I think if every time I came near you, you were mean to me, or you filled me with fake news, you told me falsehoods about the environment in a way that was detrimental to my capacity to survive in the environment, or you killed me, I would be better off living apart from you. But we don’t do that. We live together. And so therefore, the benefits of a connected life must have outweighed the costs. And they did outweigh the costs...And one of the metaphors that I use in the book is that in some ways we’re deluded into thinking that these cultural forces and cultural differences are so big and so important, and it’s like standing on a 10,000-foot plateau and noticing that one hill is 300 feet, and

one hill is 900 feet, and becoming obsessed that what is it that explains the difference between these two hills. But if you step off the plateau and go at some distance, you see that actually those are two mountains, one of which is 10,300 feet and the other of which is 10,900 feet, and actually, the forces you were previously focused on of local erosion or human action actually are trivial in comparison to the plate tectonic and volcanic forces that caused these huge mountains.”

Jesus tried to teach the same lesson to his friends and followers. Looking at the big picture of God’s love and staying grounded in what was their best way forward. It was actually going to be their best witness to the love of God. Let’s listen to a part of what Jesus said to his disciples on the night of his arrest and betrayal. This was his final speech to them.

When I read Jesus’ words to the disciples about loving one another, I find myself grateful to see these words embodied in the love that is shared in our community of faith. And it is not always because people would normally be friends in any other social circle but the church. It is also not because we always agree with each other. What holds us together is the love we share in Christ. The big mountain we always try to behold is the love of Christ. The cultural divisions we may have are the hills that don’t ultimately compare to our shared experience of the mountain of God’s love.

What is amazing is seeing how people care about each other even when they may disagree with each other on a variety of issues or may not have a lot in common with each other. The love that is shared is about something deeper. It is about knowing that we belong to one another because of our bond in Christ. The sacred presence of God in our midst is what holds us together in these relationships.

It is the same bond which Jesus shared with his disciples and gave us as an example. This bond was not naive or based on good circumstances, perfect theological agreement, or when the disciples were loveable. It was not based on them always getting what he was teaching them. It was not based on whether they deserved his love or not. It was not even based on their ability to love him. It was based on something much deeper! The passage for today was part of the farewell speech by Jesus to his disciples. But the setting is really important. It took place when Jesus was facing betrayal by Judas. In verse 21 of this chapter in John, Jesus “was troubled in spirit.” He had just washed the disciples’ feet and had his last meal with them, yet Judas was ready to betray him and sell him out to the Romans. Judas had left the inner circle of the followers of Jesus to commit an act of severe betrayal. Jesus was clearly in pain over this. But his actions following that were not motivated by his fear and pain. He did not let those dominate the scene. Instead, Jesus did two surprising things. First, he gave Judas bread to eat so that the other disciples would not even know what Judas was doing. Second, he asked the disciples to love one another. Think of how radical these acts are in light of what Jesus was facing. I could think of several options for the way Jesus could have reacted if he was to let fear and anger rule the day. He could have at least made Judas feel guilty. He could have talked about him behind his back after he left to teach the disciples a moral lesson. He could have exposed Judas for the fraud that he was. Instead, Jesus chose to do the next

loving thing. Despite his feelings of agitation and pain, Jesus chose to focus on love. This is the example which Jesus left for us to follow.

Each day we are faced with the choice between fear and love. Fear is seductive and seems to make sense, especially when it comes to siding with the current cultural wars. But when we choose fear, we always end up hurting ourselves and others. I am reminded of the current tensions for our Roman Catholic and Southern Baptist brothers and sisters and how the cultural wars are weakening their witness in the world. Think if Jesus gave into the instinct of fear how he would have demoralized his disciples and had them focus on hate instead of love. Instead of focusing on Jesus, they would have focused on Judas. The whole Last Supper would have devolved into family feud night that would have accomplished nothing. Think about it from your own experience and how anger and attack often do not result in peace of mind or of serving the purposes of the kingdom God. The opposite is true when we are able to focus our energy on love. We can set healthy boundaries so as to not let others abuse us, but our energy goes toward the common good instead of hating those who offend or scare us.

Jesus showed us what it means to be truly human, to be truly alive to the Spirit, and to be truly loving. His commandment to the disciples at that critical moment was to love one another. He commanded them to be defined by love as his community of followers. Love in the face of fear and hatred was going to be their unique mark.

And so as the followers of Jesus we are called to be defined by love ourselves. This love which Jesus calls us to is the radical kind which makes us uncomfortable. It is not the kind of love which comes because we like others or because they are deserving of our love. It is not the kind of love which we give only when things are going well or when we agree with others in our community. The love which Jesus was talking about was radical because it does not come from our normal ways of calculating and behaving. It comes from a deeper source within us. It is the kind of love that stays true even in the face of fear or pain. Even when we are terrified or hurt deeply, this kind of love does not allow such fear or pain to dominate our actions. This kind of love is the measure of our faith.

One of our core values as a congregation is “Generous, Caring, and Loving Relationships.” Our church has changed throughout its life and will continue to change, but this core value will always be essential to who we are. As we endeavor to live out this commandment of Jesus, we can proclaim and celebrate this core value we have of generous, caring and loving relationships. We seek to practice this by looking at the mountain that connects us instead of the hills that divide us. This is so needed in our world today. When we look at how cultural wars have been elevated to a level that splits families and communities, we can witness to the love of God that binds us together in one human family.

I will close with words attributed to a coworker of Mother Teresa that speak of the wisdom and logic of the love of God: “Lord, when I am hungry, give me someone in need of food; when I am thirsty, send me someone needing a drink; when I am cold, send me someone to warm up; when I am grieved, send me someone to console; when my cross grows

heavy, let me share another's cross too; when I am poor, lead me to someone in need; when I have no time, give me someone I can help a little while; when I am humiliated, let me have someone to praise; when I am disheartened, send me someone to cheer; when I need people's understanding, give me someone who needs mine; when I need to be looked after, send me someone to care for; when I think only of myself, draw my thoughts to another." Amen.