

Easter 5C'19
19 May 2019
John 13.31-35
St. Luke's Episcopal Church
North Little Rock, Arkansas
The Rev. Carey Stone

O God of unconditional Love, peel back the layers of ego-driven religion that we might truly obey your command to love one another as you have loved us through your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Rodney Williams was a guy who struggled for years to learn Spanish and finally reached a high level of fluency but not before making some pretty hilarious mistakes. Early on he was trying out his Spanish in Mexico on a hot day and complained about the heat by saying, “Me Odio el calor.” What he should have said was “Odio el calor.” The translation for “Me Odio el calor” was “I hate myself.” Everyone must have thought he had a real self-esteem problem! Some of his other friends had their intentions lost in translation as well.

One of his doctor friends was trying to tell her patients to bend their elbow ‘dobra el *codo*’ but she used a different, similar-sounding (but off-color) word when she would tell her patients to ‘*dobra el* (insert accidental word here).’ A patient finally told her she was telling people to bend over their backsides. This had gone on for years, and she always wondered why people looked at her funny.” Languages can be tricky and it is easy for the original meaning to get lost in translation.

As we look at the history of the Church it would appear that Jesus’ original intent and most important teaching has gotten lost in translation down through the centuries. The words of Jesus’ original teaching had been passed along by word of mouth for decades before they were finally written down in John’s gospel, some 50 years after Jesus’ ascension. Here are the words of Jesus’ original teaching: “*Little children...I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*”¹

The Greek that the New Testament is written in is so much more precise than English. We have only one word for ‘love’ but there are four in Greek and the one used in this passage from John is from the Greek word ‘*Agapho*’ or ‘*Agape*.’ This word helps make important distinctions between the love we may have for spaghetti, a new car, or a new jacket, and our spouse. *Agape*’ is the kind of love that is unconditional and is not an emotion but a decision rooted in the unconditional love of God, the kind demonstrated by Jesus when he walked the

¹ John 13.35 NRSV

earth. He forgave the sinner caught red handed, he gave the outcasts the same respect and honor that he would give to the rich and powerful, he forgave his executioners as he laid down his life for us. This is the kind of love Jesus says we are to love each other with.

Not long after Christ ascended the early followers began to argue about orthodoxy a word which means “right beliefs.” The arguing continued resulting in the first council of Nicaea where the Nicene Creed was hammered out, in the year 325 AD. As the centuries rolled on the Church became increasingly focused on orthodoxy. Things got so bad that folks would literally lose their heads or be burnt at the stake for their actual or often perceived heretical beliefs. What I’m describing is a huge disconnect between right Christian beliefs “orthodoxy” and right Christian practices, “orthopraxy.”

The effect of this disconnect was to take religion farther and farther away from Jesus’ original intent and teaching, far from the unconditional love of God. The Latin word for the English word ‘religion’ is “re-ligare” which means “to re connect or to link.”² The purpose of ‘true religion’ is to help us reconnect to God and reconnect to one another. But something has gotten horribly lost in translation!

The farther we have gotten from Christ’s love in action the more like a social or civic club the church has become and I have to say the pettier and mean local religious bodies have become.

The Gallup organization have been showing that church attendance and affiliation have been declining steadily since 1965 while one particular group has been on the rise – those who identify as a “none” those who do not identify with any faith group. Along with the category of “none” professionals in communities of faith have coined the term “dones” meaning those who were once very active in church but due to various circumstances are “done” with “organized religion.”

The culture of the 1950’s had the church as the center of the community, and while not everyone was active in church, they knew that they “should be, ought” or “needed to be.” In those days keeping the rules and striving for perfection mattered and guilt trips abounded. Obviously that method of keeping folks active in church has failed miserably.

² http://www.badgleyb.net/html_docs/originofreligion.htm

As numbers and contributions decline those who have remained active in church have become anxious and fearful, and have been known to turn on one another in the heat of the moment. We live in a post-Christian culture where people are looking for something real not a perfect something, they are looking for a safe place where they and the important people in their lives can experience acceptance and love and explore their faith.

We see in our gospel passage from John that Jesus at this last key moment with them on Maundy Thursday he called them his “Little Children.” Maybe that term of endearment is a clue for us that the solution for today’s church is not as complicated, as we adult religious folk think. Albert Einstein had it right when he said, *“When the solution is simple, God is answering.”* Theologians as a group can be some of the most complicating of all, but when one of the greatest theologians of the last century, Swiss theologian Karl Barth was asked what the most profound theological thought he had ever heard was, he replied, *“Jesus loves me, this I know, for the bible tells me so.”*

Today I believe God is calling us back, not to yesteryear, or some golden age that probably never even existed but back to Jesus’ final and clearest teaching his “new commandment to love one another as he loved us.” This return to Love will be the salvation of the Church, by returning to right belief and right practice we will show the world that we are truly following the risen Christ and as we continue to love each other and lift Christ up He will draw all people to himself and to his church. What an exciting time to be a follower of Christ!