

Fifth Sunday of Easter – Elizabeth de la Garza-Ahern

Acts 11:1-18; Psalm 148; Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35

Two weeks ago today I completed the Go St. Louis half marathon (13.1 miles—here is the medal!). I did not do this alone. My favorite running mate, my husband Eric, was with me, my two inspirational running partners, Ann Zahniser, Jr., and Dawn Pennington, 15,000 runners and many workers and volunteers. I enjoyed running in the city. The course started us downtown on Market Street, and then we went east across the Mississippi River and back to the Landing. From there we looped around the Soulard neighborhood and then made our way back to the finish line.

Ever since I was a child I was told that I was a runner. My parents told me that I was built like a runner. Coaches (that were constantly trying to recruit me to run) reaffirmed this idea that I was built to run. Due to the transitory nature of my status growing up, I only ran competitively for a very short time. However, I always knew I could run. While I was training for this marathon, I heard stories of how people who had never been runners all of the sudden decide to start, and they are now running full marathons—just because they want to run. I also noticed at the marathon that there were literally all kinds of people at this race. In fact there were people of many races, and they were tall and short, old and young, heavier and slim with curves and no curves, some with physical challenges and disabilities. It seems like they just wanted to run—so they did! They joined the family of runners.

In the story in Acts 11 we have Peter explaining to his Christian-Jewish community how Cornelius and his entire household became part of the family of God. Up until this point, the Jews believed that they were very special. Why not? God had been revealed to them as a people since the time of Abraham and they had recorded various accounts that reaffirmed them in believing that they were special. On top of that, they abided by certain ritual and practices (based on the Law) to make sure that their good standing and ‘chosen’ status with God would remain that way—quite exclusive. When Jesus Christ appeared, those Jews that recognized him as the Messiah became followers of Christ—thus Christians. Now Cornelius was a good and devout man, who played fair and helped the poor. He was in charge of the Italian Guard (about 100 men) and living in Caesarea. In the previous chapter it says that he prayed daily. We get a strong sense that Cornelius wanted God.

Orchestrated by God himself, not by a program of this Christian church, we read about the vision that Peter had and the angel that Cornelius saw and the messages that both received. They met, and Peter told Cornelius about Jesus the Christ, who had lived among them: healing and setting the oppressed free—how Jesus was crucified and buried, rose again and appeared to them and asked them to proclaim the good news of salvation. When Cornelius and his household heard this, the same Holy Spirit that had poured out as a gift on the first (exclusive club of) Christians descended on these Gentiles (Cornelius and his household). These Gentiles became part of the family of God, and ever since then more and more have been added. Similarly, each one of us now has a chance at salvation. God and his salvation are available to all who want it, regardless of cultural background and societal standing.

Cornelius sound like a very impressive personality. We can assume that he had a high status in society and thus great impact on the community around him. The Bible tells us, though, that the Holy Spirit makes no distinction. When Dr. Hartley, Pastor Brannon and I went to India in January of 2014, we heard of this type of account, where many people in India came to know the Lord Jesus Christ because of supernatural events of physical healings, visions and the like orchestrated by God.

When I was a teen I attended a Christian concert across the river from South Texas in Mexico; there the lead singer told this story. They had been performing in a city and nothing was happening—it was sort of a dull concert, playing music and going through the motions. Then they invited members of the audience to join them on stage. The only one that came up was a very old, toothless man with a very poor appearance. He had a worn-out guitar with him that was even missing a string. He began to play and sing in Spanish that old familiar hymn, ‘*Quieres Ser Salvo?*’/‘*Would You Be Free From The Burden Of Sin?*’, with its chorus, “*Hay poder, poder, sin igual poder en Jesus quien murio*”/“*There is power, power, wonder-working power in the blood of the Lamb.*” Then the Holy Spirit descended onto them and the audience that night, praising God. God shows no distinction and no partiality. He makes available his salvation and the Holy Spirit to all people who want it.

So if we are part of this family of God now, how are we to live? As disciples of Christ we study the Scriptures, we reflect on them and gather with other believers to worship. We seek to use God’s gifts to edify the members of the church, we may do good works and we proclaim salvation to others. In John 13 verse 34, Jesus tells his disciples (minus Judas), *I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.* Agape love—this is the type of love that God has for humans. Now Jesus is telling his disciples (except Judas, who has just departed to go to betray the Lord) to love one another *as I have loved you.*

Back then, this was a new commandment for the disciples. But WE have been hearing about this new commandment for the last 2000 years (not me personally, because I am not that old, but the church—the followers of Christ). Let’s be completely honest here, this selfless, generous and healing love that we Christians are to live by, how much of it do we experience? How do we define *one another*? Do we define the *one another* under our own terms, and love the people who reinforce our own sense of who we are? The world, the flesh and the devil do not help us much either. People are mostly focused on romantic love. This is reflected in our songs, our movies and TV shows, our conversations and the way we assess each other. Romantic love occupies much of our minds and hearts and is the main focus of our entire existence. We also fear that if we do engage in agape love that we will be seen as weak—allowing others to mistreat us or take advantage of us. We put conditions and we love **if and only if**... he loves me back, she believes like I do, does as I do, looks or does not look like me, reads or does not read what I read, and on and on—depending on the mood, and whom it is that we are evaluating as to whether they are in or out of our ‘exclusive’ set of requirements for love and acceptance. Some act as though they are afraid to run out of love and hoard whatever love they can get; they cling desperately to people and things. For some, it becomes a zero sum game, where winning allies makes them winners—yes, even in the church.

The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard said, “When one has once fully entered the realm of love, the world—no matter how imperfect—becomes rich and beautiful, it consist solely of opportunities for love.” We don’t see too many of us, except for a few people here at Saint Paul’s ☺, and others scattered throughout the world (people like Mother Teresa of Calcutta), looking at everything as an opportunity to love. So, what is keeping us from loving as Christ loved us? We do try to follow the commandments, right? What is keeping us from fully growing into the healthy and spiritual maturity that loves fully?

Dr. Neal Anderson says that the reason Christians do not grow and produce fruit is because of unresolved conflict. They are in bondage and I think that this is why we put limits on love. Plus, we will do anything to distract ourselves from resolving these personal conflicts. This week we would rather be singing ‘Purple rain, purple rain,’ remembering Prince who died on Thursday, than addressing our own personal conflicts—getting to their root. Next week it will be another distraction, anything. Let’s consider for one moment the way an emotionally disturbed person who cuts his/her own wrists functions. This individual induces bleeding lacerations on his/her own flesh. Why would anyone do this? I recently heard that it is done as a distraction from their own heartache and disappointment—their own emotional pain. Ironically, somehow, this distraction makes this person feel a little better for a little bit (otherwise, why would you do it?). Similarly, people within the body of Christ with unresolved personal conflict sometimes ‘cut each other’ and inflict pain with their actions. They mistreat each other and sometimes, by some weird twist, the person inflicting pain feels a little better for a little bit.

But wait, we Christians know that Christ loves us—that’s why we believed, right? So why is it so difficult to transfer the love that Christ has for us to loving one another? Following this simple commandment to love one another as Christ loved us is very hard. Putting this agape love into action towards one another would require a certain renewal of the mind and heart, a certain transformation. Now you may find this sacrilegious at first, but if we are to be like Christ we need to see ourselves as a true reflection of Christ’s love. Just imagine, for example, singing the hymn ‘O The Deep, Deep Love of Jesus’ (one of my favorites) and as we sing about this deep love that Jesus has for the individual we imagine ourselves having that deep, deep love within us that is so deep and so real that we can even love one another as Christ loved us. Then each one of us would sing with their own name imprinted as true representatives of Christ’s love. Here it is:

“O the deep, deep love of (Lydia, or Jim, or Bob), vast, unmeasured, boundless, free!

Rolling as a mighty ocean in its fullness over me.

Underneath me, all around me, is the current of (MY) love;

Leading onward, leading homeward to (our) glorious rest above.”

Ah home, sweet home, the new holy city, the new Jerusalem, prepared as a bride for her husband—a city ready to receive God’s love. Revelation tells us that God’s home is now among mortals—with us. There is no more separation from our creator and we can now live in harmony with God. *It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty*

(the one who wants it) *I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.* This revelation, that everything has been fulfilled in Christ, makes all creation sing praises to the Lord as in the Psalm we read.

In the family of runners, I had my running partners to hold me accountable to train regularly. Along the marathon trail, there were many stations with nourishing supplies and water. There were many volunteers that cheered me along the way and somehow hearing my name (which is imprinted on the bib) when I was really tired gave me energy to keep going. And finally, at the finish line, Olympic medalist Jackie Joyner-Kersey, a champion of the family of runners, was there to meet us. In the family of faith, we have a lifelong journey, not just a two- or three-hour event. We have many champions of our faith, here at Saint Paul's and throughout the world. Let's join and harness the power of God, through the Holy Spirit in us, to love one another. Amen!