

All You Need Is Love
The Rev. Amy Spagna
May 5, 2024 – Easter 6B
John 15:9-17

My college roommate, Rachel, and I had a shared passion for the Beatles which lasted right up until she died in 2016. Between the two of us, we owned nearly their entire catalog on CD. Rachel had everything before *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, which was released in 1967, and I had that one and most everything else they did until they disbanded in 1970. One of the overlaps in this impressive collection was the song *All You Need Is Love*. According to its Wikipedia page, it was written by John Lennon and Paul McCartney, and the Beatles first performed it for a live BBC broadcast titled *Our World* (which, notably, was the first major "live via satellite" program to be broadcast worldwide) in June of 1967. When he was asked about it, Lennon hinted that the song was inspired by political slogans, noting that he considered himself a sort of revolutionary and advocate of change. The song put the band squarely into the middle of the discussions swirling around the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Cold War.¹ Its lyrics are a deceptively simple solution to the world's ills, but perhaps Lennon and McCartney got it right: All you need is love.

That lyric certainly captures the theme of today's readings, especially the selection from the Gospel of John. Somewhat unusually, it picks up right where we left off last week. We're back in the upper room after dinner with Jesus and the disciples on Maundy Thursday. Jesus has washed their feet, and at this point is now halfway through his last lecture. He's also started to repeat himself to make sure they

¹ "All You Need Is Love." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/All_You_Need_Is_Love [accessed May 2, 2024].

absolutely understand the point which ends the excerpt we've just heard: I give you a new commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

Jesus is simultaneously comforting the disciples, and preparing them for a future without his physical presence. He is telling them all of these things now so that they will remember, believe, have peace, be kept from stumbling, and find joy in all of it.² He knows well before they do that his time is up. And now, as we listen to it again some 35 days into the Easter season, it also gives us the hint that the time he had on earth after the Resurrection is almost up. After he is taken up to heaven and takes his place there – which the Church will mark on Thursday - he's going to be gone for good, with a promised return date to be determined. All we'll have after that are his words to re-read and re-tell, and his example to emulate as best we can. And what we're supposed to DO about it, more than anything else, is to love each other as he has loved us.

Despite its urgency and simplicity, the commandment to love one another is more subtle than English translations might lead us to believe. The English language is somewhat imprecise when it comes to splitting that hair – as in, love is love, period. The word itself doesn't lend itself to distinguishing among different kinds of love. The Greek in which the gospels is written, however, is eminently more useful for that purpose. Plato and Aristotle, among others, talk about three different kinds of love: *eros*, *philia*, and *agape*. *Eros* is broadly understood as lust, that intense desire for something or someone which, while it's essential for providing motivation and creating more humans, isn't always a good thing. *Philia* means friendship. Some classicists argue that it's best

² Meda Stamper, "Commentary on John 15:9-17."
<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/sixth-sunday-of-easter-2/commentary-on-john-15-9-17-3> [accessed May 2, 2024].

understood as an “achieved” relationship, predicated on trust and affection, and not necessarily with the requirements of financial or political gain. St. Ambrose, writing in the 4th century, interpreted *philia* as the defining characteristic of Christian communities. The 3rd kind of love, *agape*, is the unconditional love of the sort which God has for humanity, and vice versa. It is absolutely selfless, and it will go to no end to put someone else and their needs first. What the NRSV can't quite get across is that *agape* is the word Jesus uses EVERY time he talks about, “love one another.” In other words: do it sacrificially, without condition, and without putting your own needs first.

Jesus' life and ministry embodied these characteristics. Especially in John, with its emphasis on knowing the divine Truth revealed in the person of Christ, *agape* functions as the enabler. It let Jesus endure everything his enemies, and his sometimes-wayward disciples, said and did to him. And in this moment, when it's all about to go down, ensuring that they would be able to continue his work in his absence came down to one simple thing: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” That is, we are to love each other not with the fickleness which can come with either *eros* or *philia*, but instead with the steadfastness and absolute lack of conditions with which he himself has loved us – and will, to the end.

Under ideal circumstances, living this out should be easy. But, we're human... and as a friend observed recently, that means there is always an open door for the sin of self-centeredness to rear its ugly head. That is, we can act out of a desire to protect what is uniquely “us” and “ours” at the cost of someone else's well-being. Thanks to the God-given gift of free will, we do have a choice to do things differently Jesus doesn't just tell us that – he shows it to us through his very life. For the early Christian community

trying to emulate him, living the commandment to love one another was one of the things which set them apart from their neighbors. They understood that *agape* was the one thing which could help hold them together amid all the good and not-so-good things which were happening around them and to them at that time.

In other words: all you need is love.

I know I say it a lot, though a group of people sticking together based on the tenet of *agape*, and resisting "the crafts and assaults of the world, the flesh, and the Devil" is not new. People, and the things that ail us, have not changed at all throughout the course of history. We are just the same as we ever were. That is why Jesus' reminder that there IS a better way still holds water. If there was anything in his last lecture which stands as a clear challenge, these words are it: "Love one another as I have loved you." They're almost a dare for us to put "THEM" – whoever "THEM" happens to be – ahead of "us." It likely will not result in the same kind of self-annihilation Jesus subjected himself to, but it just might open us up to possibilities we hadn't imagined.