

We are still in the season of Easter – and this is the season that we remember what it is that we, as Christians, are all about.

I love how we celebrate this season of Jesus’ resurrection and appearance to his disciples during the Spring. It’s like the whole earth – at least the whole of the Northern Hemisphere is rejoicing in the promise of new life and new hope. And it seems, at least to me, that it is more easy to imagine my whole self resting in God’s presence when all around me is celebrating the sun and return of warmth.

Perhaps with the warmth seeping into the soil, we can feel the warmth of God’s love seeping into the soil of our beings. It’s time to work our muscles – more specifically the muscles of our minds – to think thoughts worthy of the kingdom...the muscles of our mouths – to speak Christ’s truth in love...the muscles of our hands and feet to put into practice what we preach and our strongest muscle – our heart – to open itself to welcoming in God’s grace and love for the world.

Like the disciples in the locked room, the resurrected Christ meets us here and breathes on us – and the Spirit of Christ fills us – like the warm sun and rain and good earth stimulate the seed to open and grow.

Christ says, “Peace be on you.” “Shalom Alecha” עליך שלום. “Salam Aleichem.” “As the Father has sent me – now I send you.” To quote Pope Leo 14th, “These are [some of] the first words the risen Christ spoke to his disciples.” These words describe the shape of “God with us”- what it means to be part of the new resurrection kingdom. And these words of the risen Christ to the disciples are for us too.

But let’s go back in time a bit. Earlier in the gospel of John we hear some of the LAST words Jesus says to his disciples at supper. Jesus knew he would not long be with them – and knew that they would have to stick together if they were going to survive as people, friends and spreaders of the good news of God’s love.

He says, “Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him.

³² If God has been glorified in him,

God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once.

³³ Little children, I am with you only a little longer.

You will look for me;

and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you,

‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’

And this is the clincher right here:

³⁴ I give you a **new commandment**,
that you love¹ one another.

Jesus continues, “Just as I have **agape** loved you, you also should **agape** love one another.” ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have **agape** love for one another.”

¹ This word love is translated here as *agape* – not *philia* – which is a friendship love, or *eros* – which is romantic love, or even *storge* – the love of a parent to a child or between siblings. Agape means a selfless, unconditional, and sacrificial love. It’s a love that is motivated by the good of the other person and is demonstrated through actions.

This new commandment goes right underneath the first 10 – to Love the Lord your God. All the other ones are good too – Love God, honour parents, don’t kill and all that – But here Jesus calls us to do one more. To choose to love one another.

“Just as I have agape loved you, you also should agape love one another.” Jesus’ whole ministry to us – God’s whole being and reason for covenanting with Abraham and Abraham’s descendants is wrapped up in God’s decision to love us regardless of what we’ve done and who we are. **That** is the good news.

A Church is a body of people who have made the decision to be here. Who have made the decision to love each other. At least, that’s the commandment that Jesus gave...

And this commandment shouldn’t have been anything really new at all. Already in Leviticus – one of the books of the Torah that every young Jewish boy would have memorized- it says “Love your neighbour as yourself” Leviticus 19:18. If you did a thorough study of the Old Testament, you would find many examples of this command said in many different ways. But maybe the disciples and the Early Church, like we today, need to be reminded that it’s new – in the sense that it is counter to the comfortable easy life to which the world and we too are drawn. And it is so easy to make the decision to just let it go and do what we want to do. Before we know it we’re not actually loving as Christ would have us love.

Way back in the fourth century the hermit Xanthias admitted that “a dog is better than I am, for he has love and does not judge.” And Saint Maximos the Confessor (580–662) longed to experience the command of Jesus: “Blessed is the person who can love all people equally . . . always thinking good of everyone.”

Randy read a classic story of choice and love today as the scripture. In the Acts passage, Peter was challenged by the established Jewish followers of Christ – the circumcised Jews – descendants of Abraham. They were criticizing Peter for eating with and sharing the Gospel (the love of Christ) with Gentiles – with “those guys, those unclean folks”.

When God spoke to Peter in a vision and commanded him to eat impure or unclean foods, Peter objected as a conscientious Jew, “Surely not, Lord! I have never eaten anything impure or unclean” (10:14). And yet, he obeyed God when he was invited to meet with the Gentile named Cornelius. Here, Peter observed that the same grace from God that rested on him, one of the “chosen race” also rested on Cornelius, an unclean Roman Gentile. God called Peter to show agape love to a person so different from himself.

Our God is not a God of partiality or favoritism. God warmly welcomes every person from any nation. “The Good News that was sent to the people of Israel,” said Peter in Acts 10, “is that the grace of God is clearly given even to the Gentiles.” If the God of all creation did not consider Cornelius and other Gentiles impure or unclean, then, Peter realized, neither could he. And so, Peter’s acceptance of a Gentile into the fellowship of followers became one of the defining moments in the life of the church and in our understanding of God.

Now, all of a sudden Jesus’ words were becoming clear: For God so loved the WORLD – not the Jewish people only...but the WORLD. And some of his interactions would have started to make sense – blessing, instructing, and healing even those who were on the outside.

Peter and the whole church finally started to get it. And what eventually transpired among the earliest followers of Jesus, says Marcus Borg, was a “community shaped, not by the ethos and politics of purity, but by the ethos and politics of compassion.”

Throughout the epistles in the New Testament, we hear about the connection between claiming to love God and demonstrating love to our neighbour.

We read in 1 John 4: 20-21 “If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not (agape) love his brother or sister, who is seen, cannot (agape) love God, who is not seen. And God has given us this command: Whoever (agape) loves God must also (agape) love their brother or sister.” And we recall Jesus’ words to his disciples: “They will know that you are my disciples by your agape love to each other.

We know today that Christian history has not been all about agape – choosing to love each other.

After Constantine’s conversion to Christianity, it became cool to be a Christian – it was the state religion...people were to convert or lose all their possessions and quite probably die.

Later when the army rolled in, so did the priests –and mass baptisms happened – people converted not out of love, but out of fear.

The Crusades – I shudder when I think of these – “Christian” armies going to reclaim Jerusalem – out of love?

Later, the Catholic Church pre-reformation – made people buy indulgences for a high price. These were pieces of paper that would forgive the buyer for their sin. These indulgences put luxury food and wine on the tables of priests and monks and starved the church goers who were living in fear.

Later the same church killed peasants who would dare to rebel against the taxes – and burnt, drowned and killed any who would reread the scripture and find in it revolutionary words of love and freedom.

Later the Anabaptists of Muenster, Germany, formed their own kingdom state declaring themselves Christ’s chosen ones – and waited in vain for the 2nd coming of Christ. The picture, above, is from the cages that the Munster Magistrate and church used to hang Anabaptists after the city was conquered. These cages remain hanging on the cathedral today as a reminder.

Later, in the New World, as it were, pilgrims came and “converted” the Indians with blankets and medicine and disease and famine /poverty if they didn’t convert. In the name of Christ, residential schools run by churches to “purge the Indian” out of children purged generations out of love, family, and mental health causing lasting trauma.

Later, governments claiming to be Christian fund 100’s of millions of dollars to a war, saying, Jesus blesses us! While at home and afar the children are dying of starvation, illness and bombs.

Later, differing political viewpoints, views on creation, racial and social prejudices, differences in music style and appreciation, social slips and the gossip resulting from said differences reduce the attendance of churches across the Western World that have already declined since the pandemic.

Eventually the church becomes more of a building than a community of believers... it becomes more an architectural wonder than a wonder – evoking community.

We’ve come far from years (like mentioned above) of fear and banning your neighbour from church because they’re not good enough – to where we are now. We’ve done well. However, Agape – choosing to love, does not mean choosing to ignore injustice or sin or hurtful feelings. Agape is not tolerance, Agape is forbearance.

Forbearance is different than tolerance. The church gains strength when we choose to love regardless of our differences. It’s not overlooking the differences – like tolerance would do, but rather engaging them, deciding to love regardless of them; realizing that others may have differences of ethics, morals and traditions and still be a part of the family of God. We need to remind each other that the church is more than just “All about me” - that it’s about all of us together.

Jesus reminds us that to follow him – and to be his disciples – means that we have to choose to love. Not love because it feels good or because they’re pretty. But because to love is to show that we are disciples of Jesus, the Christ who forgives, who heals, who blesses, who tells it like it is, who always works for justice, who greets the lowly and dines with the prostitutes and tax-collectors, and who gently teases the despairing and surprises us with his presence.

The Easter season is the perfect time to stretch our heart muscle – not only is it warming outside and the darkness is receding, but the promise of new life as seen in nature AND the promise of new life we witness through the resurrection is so fresh around us.

This week, as you go about your days, think about what it means to have agape love.

What would it mean for you to hear Jesus say to you, “Just as I have agape loved you, you also should agape love one another.”³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”