

So often when we listen to the Gospel reading today – one of John Gospels great monologues on the nature of love -I find people hone in on the ‘*lay down a life for a friend*’ phrase – which we so often see inscribed on war memories – or monuments or attributed a times of heroic actions.

And it is true that as Jesus points out to the disciples, this is the ultimate consequence of love – and yet it is one example of love as Jesus was attempting to help his followers understand.

Love is the ultimate power – the greatest strength, and sometimes also when not respected, the source of much danger.

I am always struck by how often this is the theme in faith and literature, and yet for some reason as adults we find it hard to not to be cynical about the power of love.

One of the things I love about the character Dumbledore in Harry Potter is that he constantly draws people back to the point that true power is not found in magic, or the ability to fight or greatness or even money – rather it is the ability to love.

Like Jesus; like so many other teachers throughout history who have espoused the power of love, Dumbledore too is scoffed at.

Love is sacrificial at times, ask any parent! But love is so much more than that. The danger of focusing in on the sacrificial element of Jesus statement in John15, due to our need to explain the Crucifixion and Resurrection, is that it limits our ability to hear and see the depth of what Jesus is asking his followers, us, to do!

The question in this passage is not, how we will lay down our lives, but rather how we truly live our lives loving our neighbour as ourselves. How do we give all our lives to the pursuit of love? Loving each other as friends, loving each other as God loves us.

This love is not focused on how it makes me or you feel, or what we might get out of it; rather is always focused on the other, and our communal life together.

Jesus is addressing a context where at least half his audience were slaves or servants. And he doesn’t want the faith community to reflect a love which comes out of ownership of the other, but rather about a mutuality, like you have with a good friend. Jesus tries to give an example based on his relationship with God. Jesus is made known and is expressed in terms of what Jesus has learnt and heard from God. In John’s gospel, love (the belovedness of friendship) and mutual knowledge, like love and commandment-keeping, go hand in hand.¹

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2435

This is spelt out in verse 16, which builds on the image of the vine and the branches from last week - when John explains that it is Jesus who does the choosing and appointing. And for those of us who wish to abide in his love, this is surely good news, that we do not carve out a position as Jesus' friend and that our abundance does not depend on us; we might not even be able to imagine precisely what it will look like since we aren't the ones doing the pruning and can only see our part of the vine. We merely choose to abide in the love that has drawn us in, and then we blossom and bear fruit.

And that is why these readings are so important today – that we abide in this love. We know that as humans we are so very prone to draw lines between those who are in and those who are out. But Jesus makes it clear – abide in me and love one another!

The first step in this is to not make assumptions! Our learning, our relationships need to be informed by mutual knowledge. Our faith constantly challenges us to remember that we are all welcome, all called and all loved.

What does this look like for us? How is it not simply a platitude of our faith?

The brief passage we heard from the Acts of the Apostles today is the climax of a rather lengthy episode that, again, highlights the expansion of insider/outsider boundaries within the early decades of the church. Peter throughout the proceeding verses struggles in visions and experiences to understand what this new church will be like. A church where all the boundaries of culture and custom are no longer the edges of this new community.

Sadly this struggle of who is in and who is out did not stop with the early church and continues to be a question which is constantly being raised. I don't think we should be discouraged by this, I think this reflects the strength of God's message and how counter to our human instincts it is. We like to draw boundaries. God likes to open doors and welcome and love.

The is all summed up in the passage from John's gospel, and in essence the letter from John, that we are invited to abide in God's love – and to love as God has loved us – all encompassing.

So often in our busy lives we think we know someone, based on a few interactions or conversations, and so often these leads us to make assumptions which limit our ability to love them.

This might be based on assumptions or preconceived ideas about the community the person grew up in, the language they speak, the job they have!

I have been reading a murder mystery when one of the protagonists is a ‘dog walker’ but no one will believe he could be up to anything!

If I had a pound for every person who was shocked that I was sitting in a pub talking to friends because I am a priest – I would have a wonderful nest egg. I presume the assumption is that girl priests don’t drink beer, or maybe they don’t have friends?

I suspect I could keep listing, or you could add your own experience – many much more debilitating where racism or exclusion result. So much of the damage in our society is caused by our inability to get to know each other and therefore, as John points out, because we have no mutual knowledge we have no mutual love. It is why ‘Blacks Lives Matter’; and ‘Me too’ are so important. If we don’t have the courage to not only listen but hear the experiences of others – how can we love and therefore transform the world.

This is what Jesus wanted. It is what God still wants from us. That we love one another – and to do this we have to start by listening to each other – not just assuming OR worse, telling the other how they should be feeling or even just making it up!

As John points out in his letter, this should not be burdensome, but rather it should inspire us to fulfil the commandments – which in turn brings true freedom.

But for us to make this happen we have to believe!

It requires each and every one of us, despite our insecurities, perceived faults, or any other mode of self-doubt – to believe in the power of God’s Love².

A love which is a vocation and calls us first to listen, truly listen to each other.

To let go of what we think we know and be inspired by our mutual knowledge.

And allow each action, each thought to respond to this possibility of love.

That is God’s invitation to us today and everyday – to let go , to give up all else and love. Amen.

² <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/sixth-sunday-of-easter-2/commentary-on-1-john-51-6-5>