



We are midway through “Eastertide” – the season of the Church Year that runs between Easter Day and Pentecost. It is a time when we can reflect upon what it means to be a disciple in light of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

A time when those who had been with Jesus were meeting and figuring out what they were to do now that he was no longer physically present.

A time when the church began to form. And it was beset with quarrels about who was “in” and who was “out” and what it would mean to be a “follower of the Way.” Underlying it all is the new commandment “love one another as I have loved you.”

The call came in the middle of the day. Seeing the name on the phone screen gave her pause. Her mother did not usually call during the day because she knew her daughter worked. Her mother didn’t want to interrupt. And theirs had been rocky relationship – lots of frustration and some grudging love.

But this was important. “I’m sorry to bother you, dear,” her mother began, “but could you come home?” “Why, what’s wrong?” said the daughter. “It’s your Dad. I think he’s dying.” “Oh my God, of course. I’ll be on my way as soon as I can.”

She got there in time to kneel by her Dad’s bed and to hold his hand. Her Dad turned his head and smiled at her. The oxygen tube continued its quiet hiss. “I love you, Daddy” she said. “I love you” he said and smiled, although she could tell it was an effort.

She was his only child. Her Dad had been failing for some time. He had been released to hospice. hen it was clear there was nothing more to do –
The cancer would take his life before too long.

“Not today,” she prayed. Not today.” But she could sense it was time.

They had had some good talks recently –and he had imparted a lifetime’s worth of learning and love. Somehow those conversations meant more to her because she knew her Dad would not be

alive much longer. Somehow they seemed clearer with all the trappings of everyday life stripped away.

And through the hiss of his oxygen, she heard him whisper: “I know it’s hard but love your Mother. She is a good woman and I love her.”

The same kind of thing is happening in John’s Gospel reading today. Jesus knows his time is near. He has been trying to get his disciples to understand what he has been saying these past 3 years. And so he tries one last time: This is my commandment, that you love one another. If you love one another, they will know you are my disciples.

But wait, John’s gospel says this is a new commandment but is it really? Leviticus 19:18 says: You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.”

So what’s new about it? Perhaps it is because Leviticus was specifically speaking to the priests – the Levites. Jesus wants his disciples to know that even though they are not from the tribe of Levi, that this commandment applies to them. Perhaps it is because “deathbed” conversations hold a special poignancy that everyday conversations often do not.

Jesus tries one last time – knowing his death is near – to impress upon his disciples the mandate for their life and witness. Perhaps it is because up until now the focus has been on each disciple’s relationship with Jesus and not so much the disciples relationship with each other. Perhaps it is because they now have Jesus’ love for them as their template. They have seen how God – through Jesus- loves each human being.

Now, as Jesus prepares to leave them –to walk the road to the cross – he wants to leave the disciples with the understanding that the greatest honor they can do him is to love each other. To love each other as Jesus has loved them.

Jesus, the Son of God, the one whose life is love, has shown them a way of life and relationship that they will now have to follow on their own.

Their biggest task –their legacy if you will- is to continue the work that Jesus has begun. To live understanding that we are each our brother’s keeper. We are each a neighbor – and everyone else is neighbor to us. To understand that God is love and that love means action.

In the reading from Acts, the apostle Peter, one of the leaders of the newly forming church, is struggling with how to reconcile the ways of Judaism with the Christian church. Does someone have to become Jewish before they can become Christian? Do all men need to be circumcised? Does someone have to abide by the dietary restrictions?

And God, through this wonderful, weird and rather wacky vision of a sheet with all kinds of animals on it, says “everything that God has made is clean.” Everything that God has made is good. Everything that God has made is loved by God.

We humans are the ones who too often make people jump through hoops to earn our love or a place at the table. We humans are the ones who set up criteria to be part of the “in-group.” We are the ones who need the reminder to “love one another as I have loved you.”

There is a reason that the document is called “Last Will and Testament.” It expresses our wishes with respect to the things of this world. It is our Testament about what we believe, what we want to happen after we die. But the better approach is to have those conversations before we die. When we have a chance to actually talk- not just a unilateral voice from beyond the grave. Throughout life- from beginning to end: from Alpha to Omega, we have a chance to love one another as Jesus loved us.

And when it is time to say goodbye- to give that last hug and that last kiss and that last smile, even through the tears- may the prayer and blessing be:

“And they knew him as a disciple of Christ because he loved his neighbor as himself.”