

Food Is Love

Today's Gospel picks up where we left off last week. Jesus is at dinner with his disciples. He has just likened himself to a grapevine, his followers to the branches, and the Father to the gardener who prunes and tends the vine. Now, he delivers the commandment that rests at the heart of the Gospels: "love one another as I have loved you."

This commandment is part of the Farewell Discourse, a lovely, lengthy monologue that appears only in the Gospel of John. Some scholars believe that the beautiful words attributed to Jesus in this passage were either concocted by the author or added to a later version of his text. We may never know on this side of the veil. Lately, however, I've wondered if the disciples weren't a lot younger than tradition portrays them, perhaps only twelve or so when Jesus called them. (It would certainly explain all their horsing around.) If so, it's entirely possible that the Beloved Disciple lived long enough to write the Gospel of John, recording the Farewell Discourse from memory. Factor in the ease with which children memorize and a little divine inspiration from the Holy Spirit, and I think we can legitimately believe that Jesus really spoke the words that John gives us. That means we are called, just as the disciples were, to love one another as Jesus loves us. The question then becomes what we're actually called to do.

We talk a lot about love in the church. That's nice, but it doesn't mean much unless we consider what "love" means in the context of our faith. When speaking of love, Jesus uses the Greek word *agape* (ἀγάπη). *Thayer's Greek Lexicon* defines *agape* in this passage as Jesus's love for us and the love between Christians that is "enjoined and prompted by [our] religion, whether the love be viewed as within the soul or expressed." *HELPS Word-studies* further explains that *agape* focuses on preference, so it defines divine love as loving the way God prefers. Putting this together, Jesus is asking his disciples, and us, to love one another, whether in our hearts or in our

actions, according to God's preferences. That's still a bit circular, though. Perhaps we can understand *agape* better if we look at how Jesus did it.

Jesus's *agape* love for us is most obviously expressed in the Passion. As he says, there is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends. The disciples followed his lead and laid down their lives for him. John alone is believed to have died of natural causes; the rest were martyred for their faith. Even if we wanted to, though, most of us won't have the opportunity to die for Jesus. We don't kill people for their faith in 21st century America. If we're going to lay down our lives for Jesus, we have to do it by following his example and *living* for him instead.

Jesus miraculously healed a lot of people and cast out legions of demons. Very few of us can heal with a touch, and please don't even try to perform exorcisms on your own. The church has trained professionals for that. Jesus also did a lot of preaching and teaching. Christians can do both, but Episcopalians are often reluctant to evangelize. That leaves us with one last way in which Jesus loved the people: he fed them. Now, we're in the realm of the doable.

Unless you're Native American or your ancestors were brought to these shores against their will, you're probably descended from people who came here to escape famine. Consistently getting enough to eat has been a significant problem throughout much of human history. Every inhabited continent on Earth has experienced famine at some point, and cyclical famine has plagued societies engaged in subsistence farming since the dawn of agriculture. Immigrants who came to this country hoping to enjoy a better life often brought a profound fear of hunger with them. When food became more available, it turned into a tangible expression of their love.

The women in my own family expressed their love by cooking. Their recipes are treasured heirlooms. They're not always easy to follow – "butter the size of a walnut" isn't exactly a precise measurement. Did you mean the size of a walnut with or without the shell,

Grandma? She died long before I was born, so I can't ask her, but her cookbook filled with handwritten notes is one of my most prized possessions. Her sisters cooked intuitively – Aunt Evelyn's potato salad and Aunt Arlene's shrimp dip are made by combining ingredients to taste, and Aunt Gertie's peach pie involves drizzling cream over sugared fruit until it looks right. If it bakes up runny, you just eat it with a spoon. Our family is far from unique. Whether it's Nonna's marinara sauce, Grannie's crabcakes or Uncle Billy's barbeque, family recipes preserve cherished memories of the beloved people who lovingly prepared them.

Much of Jesus's ministry revolved around food. He taught some of his most important lessons at the table, turned water into wine as his first public miracle and, on a couple of occasions, fed thousands of people by multiplying their scant provisions. His followers were so thrilled to have enough to eat that Jesus had to escape before they crowned him king by force so he would keep feeding them. The sacrament of communion that he gave to his disciples, and us, is a sacred meal of bread and wine. We eat, we drink, and we remember Jesus.

It seems important to me that Jesus fed the people with simple food. Bread, fish, wine ... no decadent Roman tidbits for our Lord and his followers. These days, food has become entertainment, and it's easy to drop hundreds of dollars per person in a Michelin starred restaurant – if you can even get a reservation. Without wanting to criticize the celebrity chefs who have elevated cooking to an advanced art form, when Jesus said "feed my sheep," I don't think he meant seven-course tasting menus with paired wines and liqueur-spiked coffee to close. I think he intended us to enjoy simpler meals, preferably together.

This is Rogation Sunday, which kicks off three days of fasting and prayer to ask God to protect us from natural disasters and bless our harvests. Rogation days originated in fifth century France, and most churches don't do much with them anymore. But in an era where so much of

our food is heavily processed and slickly packaged, it's good to be reminded that everything we eat and drink is a product of God's good earth. Whether we dress it up or tone it down, food is a precious gift from the Father. We owe him thanks and praise whenever we sit down to eat.

Advances in production have made food cheaper and more plentiful, but too many people still go hungry. Our own diocese has launched a project to create a food security network because so many Marylanders don't have reliable access to nutritious food. It's not just Maryland; the nonprofit Feeding America estimates that forty-four million Americans, thirteen million of them children, experience food insecurity each year. Farther afield, where poverty persists, natural disasters occur or war rages, famine follows. Thankfully, there are good people doing the hard work of feeding those in need. Organizations like Episcopal Relief & Development, Food for the Poor, and World Central Kitchen feed the hungry around the world. Closest to home, St. Luke's' food pantry currently serves as many as eighty guests each week, many of whom have families. As we pray for God's blessing on our fields and farms, we can ask him to bless those good Samaritans who work so hard to feed the hungry. We can also support their efforts as the Spirit moves and our own financial circumstances permit.

Thanks be to our generous God, there's enough food in this world for everyone if we're willing to share. One way to love one another as Jesus loves us is to do our best to make sure that no one goes hungry. Nice as it is to love people in our souls, if *agape* is about God's preferences, I suspect he prefers it when we move past abstract ideas and actually *do* something about loving our neighbors. Jesus promises that, if we keep his commandment to love one another, he will call us not servants, but friends. What more could we possibly desire? As the old hymn says, "what a friend we have in Jesus." On this Rogation Sunday, my prayer is that we will lovingly share the bounty of our world with those in need, so that Jesus will also have good friends in us. *Amen.*