

They'll know we are Christians by our Love: Readings: 1 John 5:1-6; John 15:9-17 Easter 6/B
By The Rev. Karen Faye Siegfriedt; St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Atascadero CA 5/5/24

On April 18th of this year, Samuel Orbovich, a 71 year old driver, drifted his SUV to the right of the highway on Interstate 94 in St. Paul, Minnesota. His car then hit a light pole and crashed into a guardrail. He was stuck inside his vehicle as flames began to shoot out of the car. Kadir Tolla happened to be driving along the interstate when he saw this dangerous situation. He jumped out of his car and ran to help. At the same time, about 10 others got out of their vehicles and sprinted toward the SUV. It was a chaotic scene as people tried to yank open the doors but the guardrail kept the doors from fully opening. One man started spraying a fire extinguisher while another grabbed a chunk of debris from the side of the road to try to smash the driver's side window open. Flames of fire were blowing into the rescuers' faces when a Minnesota Department of Transportation worker arrived at the scene. He was finally able to smash the window open at which point the group of motorists pulled the driver out, feet first. Once out of the hospital for minor injuries, Samuel Orbovich, the driver, thanked the people who rescued him. He said: "I am alive today because several Good Samaritans and professional first responders saved my life. Fred Rogers used to say that whenever someone sees something scary, "Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping." (From Washington Post)

What is it that makes some people risk their own life in order to save another? In today's gospel, Jesus says: "This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you...I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another. (John 15) In other words: "They'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love, yes they'll know we are Christians by our love." (Lyrics from today's gospel hymn)

For the past five weeks, Episcopal churches have been reading the 1st letter of John. This epistle was written to the early Christian communities who were arguing over the nature of Jesus and what it means to be a faithful follower of Christ. There had been much quarreling over these particular theological issues, threatening to divide newly formed communities of faith. In response, the 1st letter of John addressed the following questions: Who is God? How does God manifest God's self? How do we even know God if we can't see God? Where does Jesus fit into the equation? How do we know if we are on the right track? The answers to all these questions is one word: *LOVE*. "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. For everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. (1John 4,5)

The kind of love that God shows us and the kind of love we are to show others is not some romantic sentiment or an individual feeling or something to add to our "to do" list. It is a sacrificial way of life lived out by following God's commandments. This kind of love is commonly referred to in Greek as *agape*. It is a love that expects nothing in return. It is an action, not a feeling. It is a commandment that Jesus gave to his followers. (John 15)

Last month, there was a post on my Facebook feed, trashing Christians and their behavior. The person who wrote it accused the Christian religion of being a destructive force in our country that threatens democratic rule. This particular post focused on the mean spiritedness of many Christians who have a disregard for human rights, an elevation of Trump to a Christ-like figure, and an embrace of fundamentalist doctrine rather than righteous living. Another person on this feed went on a political rampage criticizing Christians who embrace partisan politics over Jesus' message of love. She mocked Christians as people who lacked critical thinking skills; people who have been conditioned to believe lies uttered by politicians who sell bibles to promote their political ambitions. She ends her post with saying: "Where is the voice of normal Christians? I just don't get it!" In summary, this Facebook feed was a caricature of Christianity that hurt my heart.

- So how has it come to be that many perceive Christians as being ignorant and mean-spirited rather than people who love?

- How has it come to be that a large swarth of Christians in the United States have transformed Jesus Christ from "a humble servant of the abject poor to a symbol that stands for gun rights, prosperity theology, anti-science, and a limited government that neglects the destitute?"

- How has it come to be that many churchgoers now view the teachings of Jesus Christ (such as in the sermon on the mount) as nothing more than "liberal talking points?"

- Why have both progressive and conservative churches of protestant and catholic denominations allowed partisan tribalism to take precedence over Jesus' teachings on love, thus causing division within our communities?
- Why are many worshippers more interested in specific rituals, liturgies, and particular music rather than loving God with their whole heart, mind, and soul?

My take on all of this is that Christians have forgotten that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life who has commanded us to love one another. Perhaps the problem is that we limit God to an idea or a philosophical belief that simply gives us comfort in times of challenge and death, leaving Jesus and his teachings out of the equation. Maybe it has to do with allowing our moral compass and political choices to be more influenced by materialism and financial concerns than the biblical precepts of compassion. Kurt Vonnegut, an American novelist once said: "We'll go down in history as the first society that wouldn't save itself because it wasn't cost-effective." Bottom line is this: Jesus pointed to and exemplified the path of love, generosity, mercy, and inclusivity and said, "Come follow me." But instead of following him, many simply engraved his finger in stone and began worshiping his finger rather than following in his footsteps.

Some try to redefine the nature of God through specific theologies, restrictive moral codes, fear of retribution, or proper liturgical practices. These redefinitions sometimes create a caricature of Christianity that often shows up on Facebook. But the letter of John cuts to the chase: "Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love." Jesus said: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." In summary, Christians are called to love God and love our neighbor. Everything else in Christianity is simply a commentary on this great commandment.

My friends in Christ, now is the time for us to revisit the essentials of Christianity. Now is the time to lift up our voices and spread the good news in Christ, exemplifying love in action to those Facebook fans who have lost faith. "We now live in a world of outrageous pain. The only response to outrageous pain is outrageous love."

This Thursday evening at PACSLO, Steph and I attended the musical "Come from Away." It is the story about the people of Gander, Newfoundland and the 38 planes carrying 6600 passengers who were forced to land when American airspace was shut down on 9/11. Neither Gander, with a population of 11,000, nor towns in the surrounding area had enough hotel space for all those stranded passengers.

Immediately, local television stations in Newfoundland put out a call to its residents with the mayor chiming in: "*Lend a hand, do what you can!*" Schools and nonessential businesses were closed down allowing local folks ranging from senior citizens to schoolchildren to volunteer. They greeted the "plane people" with warmth, food, clean bedding, and hot showers. Schools, churches, and legion halls were converted into makeshift dormitories. Some residents even invited visitors to stay in their homes.

Area pharmacies filled prescriptions without cost. Free public telephones were installed so visitors could call home while donations of toiletries, clothing, and food flowed in. "Much of the food was stored at the Gander Community Centre's ice rink, turning it into the largest walk-in freezer in the country. Once basic needs were met, the Newfoundlanders worked to entertain the visitors. They organized tours of the town, bowling matches, and concerts by local bands. Visitors also were introduced to regional cuisine, including stewed moose." When asked about their generosity, many residents responded that their efforts were not out of the ordinary. "For us, it was just every day," said a local newspaper reporter. "You don't turn your backs on people in need." This outpouring of generous love from the people of Gander is the proper pattern for Christian love; a disciplined habit of care and concern for others in need. That is what today's gospel is all about in a nutshell!

*People were created to be loved. Things were created to be used. The reason why the world is in chaos is because things are being loved and people are being used. (Dali Lama)

* Do your little bit of good where you are. It's those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world. (Desmond Tutu)

* Love is never wasted. For its value does not rest on reciprocity. (CS Lewis)

* John said: "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God...God is love." (1John)

*Jesus said: No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. (Jn. 15)

" O God, you have prepared for those who love you such good things as surpass our understanding: Pour into our hearts such love towards you, that we, loving you in all things and above all things, may obtain your promises, which exceed all that we can desire; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*" (Today's Collect, BCP 225)