



## *“The Last Frontier”*

John 15:9-17

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**May 17, 2009**

Sixth Sunday of Easter

Monday morning, as always, I took a first look at the passages assigned for today, the sixth Sunday of Easter. For those of you who are new or unfamiliar with church tradition, we follow what is called the Lectionary, an organized set of readings for each Sunday of the year. The Lectionary is a three-year cycle of readings organized around the four gospels with other readings from the Hebrew Scripture and the New Testament Epistles. Lectionaries are a custom as old as the Jewish Synagogue, a custom the early church quickly adapted to Christian usage.

Usually, I enjoy my Monday morning exploration of the Lectionary texts. After all these years of ministry and preaching, the weekly search for a word to bring you on Sunday morning is a pleasant and often exciting exercise. And, whether you realize it or not, you send me on my weekly mission to find a word to bring back to you on Sunday.

Monday, however, when I looked at today’s lessons, I inwardly groaned. The first lesson from Acts is a story about how the Christian gospel smashes ancient walls that divide the human family – a repeat of last week’s sermon. I quickly laid it aside.

I opened the Gospel Lesson which continues last week’s reading from John 15. I groaned again. It is very familiar ground. Jesus commands his disciples to love one another. We covered this topic just last week. How many times can you say the same thing in a new and interesting way?

Everyone already knows about Jesus’ love command. Lots of Christians don’t obey Jesus’ command, but we all know about it. Most non-Christians know love is at the heart of the Christian faith – and remind us of it from time to time.

All of us in this room attempt to center our moral life in Jesus’ Great Command to love God and our neighbors. It’s our congregation’s mission statement. I don’t need to remind you of its importance. And you don’t need me to tell you once again that Christian love is defined by the sacrificial life and death of Jesus Christ. Christians for millennia have attempted to pattern their ethical and social lives on Jesus’ example. It’s why the cross is our great symbol.

I despair of finding new and creative ways to say the same thing I say so much of the time – and what you believe and we all try to obey. Christmas and Easter are annual challenges to creativity of the preacher to overcome familiarity. But love is a weekly communication challenge.

So, Monday morning I imagined you feigning interest as I set off on another rhetorical journey into the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ. I could see your minds wandering, hoping I’d be brief and perhaps even finish early. I considered changing the Scripture

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Lessons to alternative texts. Who would know but me? I thought about a sermon on the annual meeting or stewardship – appropriate topics for today!

Alas, however, I've learned that when texts resist me, those are likely the texts I need to explore – again! So Wednesday I went back to the drawing board.

Then a wonderful thing happened. I received an email from old friends we haven't seen in years. Vic and Kathy and their two sons are visiting New York in June and want to spend time with us. The email got me thinking.

Kathy was a college student when I came to our church in Minneapolis. Her parents were leaders in the congregation. I knew Kathy casually from her visits home during vacations.

As often happened, Kathy met a guy at school and fell in love. She asked me to perform the ceremony. As part of the planning process, I got to know her fiancé, Vic. Vic is an unusual man. A brilliant student back then, Vic planned a life in the academic world or in the ministry. He and Kathy were heading off to seminary after the wedding.

Vic's story is fascinating. He is the son of immigrants. His father is Ukrainian and his mother is from Lithuania. His parents met in a refugee camp after World War II. They came to America, worked hard, and raised a brood of very successful children. Vic told me his father's story was a miracle, a story so good he wanted his dad to tell it to me. He said his dad is reluctant to tell the story but he might be willing to share it.

At the rehearsal dinner, Vic made sure I was seated next to his father. We got acquainted over fine food and when dessert was served, I asked him to tell me his story. He agreed and in broken English he began.

During the war, when he was a teenage boy in Ukraine, he was drafted into the Soviet army. He was sent to join the invasion of Germany that ended the war. During battle, he was separated from his unit. Alone, frightened, and lost, he wandered into a village and hid under a farm wagon. He was sure he was going to die.

He can't remember how he came into possession of a German New Testament but he had one in his shirt pocket. He is ethnic German so he was able to read it. Having grown up in the officially atheistic Soviet Union, he knew absolutely nothing about the Bible or Christianity. He knew enough, however, to open and read, hoping to find something to help him die in peace.

A German Lieutenant approached the wagon with his pistol drawn. He looked under the wagon and pointed the gun at Vic's dad, who in turn held the Bible out to the officer. The German holstered his weapon and crawled under the wagon and began a Bible study. The scene is rather amazing: moral enemies armed with hatred and lethal intent, sitting together reading the Bible and praying. In the end, Victor's dad accepted Christ as his savior. Then the German took him into custody and sent him to a P.O.W. camp, accompanying him much of the way so that he made it there alive, as the war was coming to a close.

After the war, he married his Lithuanian sweetheart, became a Baptist minister, and spent his days in America as the superintendent of the Ukrainian Baptist Churches on the East Coast.

What prompted that German officer to put away his weapon, put his own life at risk, defy his orders and lay aside his deep nationalism to help his enemy? In the heat of battle, such acts run against the grain of human nature.

The easy answer is that Christian love enabled the German officer to push past human boundaries to courageous, perhaps heroic, action. True enough, but while such stories inspire us, they are not likely to overcome the weapons we all carry deep within us that keep us from loving our enemies, forgiving those who hurt us, reconciling with alienated

friends or family members, and living at peace at home, at work, in the neighborhood, or at church.

The real question, not just for that officer, but for every follower of Jesus is this: how do we break through the contradictory forces of our humanity to do what we know we ought to do, but find so difficult, even impossible, to do? How can the divine impulse of the Christian Gospel break through the hard ground of human reality, take root in our hearts, and prompt us to love, forgive, reconcile and live in peace?

It is too true that such inspirational stories are not usually enough to enable us to holster the weapons that reside deep inside ourselves: weapons that cause us to judge others so quickly, to strike back at the slightest provocation, to bear grudges for years, and to fail to love those closest to us, let alone our enemies. What does it take to recreate us so that we love, forgive and serve our families, our neighbors, and the world?

The real question is simple, but profoundly complex: how do we break through the contradictory forces of our natures so that we do what we know we ought to do, rather than what is convenient or feels good? How can the divine impulses of faith break through the hard ground and take root in our hearts so we live to love, reconcile, and serve?

As I relived that story, I noticed something quite obvious, something that puts flesh and blood on the abstract notion of love and, perhaps, will help us holster our weapons. That German officer was committed to something larger than himself, his commission, his orders, and his loyalty to his nation. His heart was stirred by the humanity of his enemy, and he remembered that God had first claim on his heart. He was moved by something beyond himself: a human in need and his God. He saw more than a cowering enemy; he saw a child of God in need and, perhaps, saw the potential in a redeemed Soviet enemy. He was able to move outside his self-interest, his professional interest, and his national interest to an act of mercy and compassion and, most of all, an act of love. He gave himself to God and, therefore, was able to move outside himself to give himself to another.

“I give you a new commandment,” Jesus said, “love one another, as I have loved you.” In this world of destructive selfish ambition, profound self-interest, and creeping narcissism, live your lives in the interest of and on behalf of others. Believe it or not, life isn’t about you!

Living that commandment in its simplest terms means giving ourselves to God so we can give ourselves to each other. Then love will begin to tame our hearts so quick to judge and so slow to forgive, so prone to contempt of those who differ socially, politically, religiously, who so easily become “them.”

With apologies to Star Trek, the final frontier is not space, it is the human heart. Taming our hearts is the work of the gospel and it is a lifetime project. Christ wants to step into the contradictory impulses of the human experience and change us from the inside out.

Scripture makes clear and human experience confirms that this love that tames the heart is the work of our lives. And, Christian love is a craft best learned in communities formed by the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ – communities like this one.

God’s love became enfleshed in Jesus of Nazareth and he calls his disciples to enflesh God’s love in our lives and in our congregations. “I call you my friends,” he told his disciples, “love each other like I have loved you.”

When we invite Jesus Christ into our lives and into our community, he insists on bringing all his friends with him. He crossed the final frontier and calls us to let him tame our hearts and shape our community. That work begins when we invite him to come and change us – and keep on inviting him in!

Amen.

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