

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt
Fifth Sunday of Easter - Year C
St. Paul's Lutheran Church
Acts 11:1-18
Psalm 148
Revelation 21:1-6
John 13:31-35
05/15/2022

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. John:

31When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. 32If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. 33Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' 34I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. 35By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

The Gospel of Our Lord

Prayer

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Better Love

Good morning! As the musician Haddaway said in 1993, "*what is love?*" That is the question we will try to answer today. The Oxford Dictionary keeps it pretty simple, saying that it is "*an intense feeling of deep affection.*" I doubt I'm the only one who finds that a little inadequate.

Wars have been fought over the thing. Whole libraries are full of books wrestling with the deeper meaning of the word. Poets have spent whole lifetimes trying to capture its essence perfectly. A professor I had for a religion and film class in undergrad once said that all films were essentially about death, about love, or both. It's a word that's used so frequently that it almost makes the word unknowable. The author and pastor Rob Bell once said something along the lines of "I love my wife, but I also love cheese?" So, when Jesus commands the disciples in our relatively short Gospel lesson to love one another, it's clear that the carrying out of that command can certainly look a lot different.

If the scripture lesson sounds a little familiar, that's because we just heard it back on Maundy Thursday, where our lesson is a piece of a larger text. But while I promise that we'll come back to the Gospel, first we need to spend some time with Revelation. (Notice that it's not RevelationS, no "s" at the end.) I was once told that it's either a brave or insane pastor who preaches on the book of Revelation, so let's see which one I am...

This specific piece of scripture from the book of Revelation is a personal favorite of mine. It will be read at my funeral if I have my way. Revelation is a tough book to read and try to understand. It's not only the last book in the New Testament, but it's also most likely the last book that was written that made it into our scripture. Written sometime around the year 100, it almost split the Council of Carthage 50/50 when its placement was debated. It's hard for us to understand, but Revelation falls under a very specific genre of work called apocalyptic writings, and they were very popular in the first century. These apocalyptic writings, and trust me, there were a lot of them, were the equivalent of the fantasy novels that everyone loves. The piece that can easily slip through the cracks is that they were

never meant to be understood as road maps for the end of the world. Like all great work, they used the context of a different time or event to give commentary on the current social situation. George Orwell's *1984* is a perfect example.

Revelation is especially interesting because it was attempting to critique the current ruling body, the Roman Empire, in a way that would still allow the book to be read, without bringing down the wrath of said Empire. And so it was written in code. The city on the hill is Rome, and Babylon is used instead of the Roman Empire. The author, a man named John, wanted to warn the Christian churches in Asia Minor that the empire couldn't be trusted.

As the author of Revelation weaves visions together in a message to the church, we arrive at the second to last chapter of the book, and it's here where we are given a message of hope for what the future could hold: *"1I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; 4he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." 5And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." 6Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning*

and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.”¹

It’s beautiful... But we need to unpack some of it. The first point of confusion is about the sea. In the first verse we’re told that when the new heaven descends the sea will be no more. This doesn’t mean that we won’t have beaches and days at the ocean in heaven. But what it DOES mean is that chaos will be eradicated. Dana Ferguson writes that *“John describes this particular city by noting what is not in it. After the first heaven and the first earth have passed away, he says ‘the sea is no more.’ A powerful biblical symbol for chaos, the sea also represents what separates humans from one another. So part of the beauty of this dry, new Jerusalem is that there are no stormy seas to separate people from one another. Here God and human beings live in harmonious relationship with one another.”²* We take the power of the sea for granted, but I’m sure some of our Navy sailors can attest to the power and terror of a true storm at sea. In one of the creation stories of Genesis it’s God’s initial taming of the seas, the primordial chaos, that allows for the creation of the world. But just as our salvation is something we have now, but not yet, so too is the final ultimate taming of the chaos put off.

This means that sometimes chaos bleeds through. And while this chaos works on a cosmic scale, we see its reality on a much more human level. Just look at yesterday’s actions of a lone gunman in Buffalo, NY. At around 2:30pm, a white man drove across the state to the predominantly African-American community in Buffalo and in an event that was racially motivated, started shooting at beautiful people of color, once again

¹ Revelation 21:1-6 NRSV

² Bartlett, David L., and Barbara B. Taylor. *Feasting on the Word. Year C, Volume 2.* Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008. p. 462.

reminding them of a truth they never forget: racism is a reality they cannot escape. As of this morning, ten people are dead and others are still injured. THIS is an example of the chaos that won't be in the New Jerusalem...

Again, Dana Ferguson hits the nail on the head, writing that *“The words that we hear today in Revelation have the power to become such life-altering words for God’s people, especially for those who find themselves in the midst of struggle and turmoil. ‘It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end’ (v.6). These are words that matter at the very heart of life, where we ask who we are, who God is, and what is the value of the Christian pursuit. They tell us that there will be a new day when we live face to face with God. All that has hindered, hurt, and hampered us will be gone. What will be left is a life with God, filled with relationships of joy and strength with God’s people.”*³

Here’s the cool thing. The Revelation text tells us that God is doing a new thing. God isn’t content with just letting things go along how they are right now. That’s where the Gospel lesson comes in, and that’s where you and I have a part too. In the waters of our Baptism we enter into a relationship with the man who commanded those disciples to love. And so that command becomes one that we answer too. And I’m not talking about the generic idea of love that seems to not really mean anything. I’m talking about love in action. Love that defends and stands up for our siblings of color in Christ who continue to be trampled by our indifference. It means loving in a way that stands up to the institution that ignores the larger problems. It’s a love that calls on us to serve, caring for those all around us simply because they’re a human being too! It’s a love that we saw on the

³ Bartlett, David L., and Barbara B. Taylor. *Feasting on the Word. Year C, Volume 2.* Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008. p. 466.

cross, a love that looks into our hearts and calls on us to do more. We have to do more... Amen.