

Stretching Toward Sunday

Thoughts, readings and reflections
based on this week's lectionary readings

April 24, 2016
Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year C

The readings this week:
• Acts 11:1-18 • Psalm 148
• Revelation 21:1-6 • John 13:31-35



[Click here to read this week's Scriptures](#)

Tough Love

It sounds so easy. We Christians ought to be able to love, right? It's a defining mark of who we are. It is fundamental to the faith we proclaim and commanded by the One we follow. So why is it so hard to practice this radical and inclusive love by which Jesus says people will recognize us as his followers?

What is it about love that is so doggedly difficult? Maybe the answer is found by contrasting when and where love seems easy. Love is easy when I love people who think like me, look like me, live like me, and love me, too. Heck, that's a recipe for a veritable love fest. Love is easy when I can talk about it, read about it, and think about it. Love in abstract appears mighty appealing. Romantic love and movie love seem so special and charming. Everybody loves a good story, right? Yes, when we look at love through these lenses, it looks downright doable and delightful. Human nature is considerably messier, however, and even the most self-aware and selfless among us can find love to be tough in practice.

That said, we must never give up trying to live into a life of radical love. For those of us charged with preaching and teaching and leading in the beloved community, we must never stop talking about what Jesus says about love, what love looks like in practice and action, and how we get to places of deeper and more mature Christian love. This Sunday's gospel lesson reminds us of this necessity. Jesus commands us to love.

To provide a way to understand and practice radical love, consider using the letters of the word "love" to describe how to learn, cultivate, and practice love.

Listen—to love is also to listen. It is important to listen intently to the one or ones we are called to love, to hear what he or she has to say, and to be attentive to the other's feelings and thoughts. Listening involves silencing one's own internal voices by avoiding the rush to conjure up a response before the person has even finished speaking. Listening also requires willingness to sit with some space to think about and understand what is spoken. Invite people to contemplate their active listening skills and to sit with silence.

Open—to love is to be open to others and to new possibilities. The minute we close our minds and hearts to the possibility of change and growth we also smother our capacity to love. Because love is not static, because love seeks the good of others, radical love calls us to open

our minds, our hearts, and our lives to the new, the strange, and even the uncomfortable. We trust the Spirit's guidance as we allow ourselves to be vulnerable and open to others, and we pray for help to avoid judgment and prejudice in the process. Invite people to consider what it would mean to be open to the Spirit's guidance and open to all whom they encounter.

Visible—to love is to be visible. Love does not hide its light. Love goes out into the world and risks being seen with those who are easy to love and those who push us beyond our comfort zones. Jesus never shrank from being seen and interacting with those on the margins or who were unclean and unacceptable in the eyes of the established religious traditions and institutions of his day. Sure, much of love takes place quietly in unseen and unappreciated ways, but love does not hesitate to enter life's trenches, roll up her sleeves, and be Christ's hands, feet, and eyes in the world. Invite people to find ways to make radical love visible in the week to come.

Engage—to love is not to sit idly by and watch life parade go past. To love is to engage life fully, to enter into relationship with others in a spirit of hope and joy and love. Engaging in life and relationship can be messy and dirty, to be sure, but there is no other way to experience life in community and to share the agape love of Jesus. We are called to open our faith communities to all, to open our homes, and to open our hearts. We risk pain, we risk breach of trust, but we also risk wonder and light and peace. If we believe Christ's words to "love one another as I have loved you" then we must engage one another as Christ engaged saint and sinner alike. We must practice hospitality, mercy, and lovingkindness. Invite people to find one way to engage in active, radical love this week—either through a ministry or on their own at work or in the community.

When we confess each week that we have failed to love, that we have sinned against God and neighbor, we receive forgiveness and turn anew to try again. Will we get it right this time? Probably not. Will we make progress and perhaps even make a difference in the name of the One who loves us with a love stronger than death? We very well might. The sure thing is that we will never know unless we try, and we will likely not try unless we remind each other that Jesus commands us to love. This is not an option. This is the life, the way, of those who follow Christ.



Reflecting on the Word



1st Reading: [Acts 11:1-18](#)

Is there a prejudice that you have been struggling with? What did the apostles and Christians in Judea hear? When Peter went to Jerusalem, who criticized him? Who were the "circumcised believers"? Why did the circumcised believers imply that it was wrong for Peter to eat with Gentiles? How did Peter explain his actions? How did Peter dispel the idea that the Gentiles were second-class citizens? On what did Peter's defense rest? How did Peter's argument prove convincing? How did Peter's step of including non-Jews affect the church? What part of Peter's presentation speaks to you the most? Can you see the early church's problems in today's churches? [The Seed Christian Fellowship, delessons.org](#)

Psalm Reading: [Psalm 148](#)

Think about an exciting time of corporate praise that you have been a part of. How does seeing others engaged in worship inspire your worship? This psalm divides into two six-verse stanzas (vv. 1-6 and 7-12), with a recap that underscores the motivation to praise (vv. 13-14). What two major chorus groups are appealed to here? Within those two major choral divisions, who joins in praising God? Do you see this as mere figurative (symbolic or exaggerated) language used by the psalmist to call all things in heaven and on earth, or is there some way that all the various elements actually praise God? Why praise God at all? What is the closest you have come, this side of heaven, to experiencing a worldwide worship service such as this psalm announces? Do you look forward to heaven when this psalm finds its fulfillment, or does praising God all day long sound boring to you? How does this psalm provide a new or fresh picture of praise for you? [Quiet Time Bible Study, InterVarsity Press](#)



Melani Pyke, Psalm 148 Praise and Splendor

Praying Toward Sunday

Behold:
there is a new heaven,
a new earth
and a new city,
where the river of life flows,
where the tree of life bears fruit in every season.
This heaven,
this city,
this river,
this tree
are a vision of your life
reborn, restored, and renewed.
Thanks be to God!

The first thing that must strike a non-Christian about a Christian's faith is that it is all too daring. It is too beautiful to be true: The mystery of being, unveiled as absolute love, coming down to wash the feet and the souls of its creatures; a love that assumes the whole burden of our guilt and hate, that accepts the accusations that shower down; the disbelief that veils God again when he has revealed himself; all the scorn and contempt that nails down his incomprehensible movement of self-abasement- all this absolute love accepts in order to excuse his creature before himself and before the world. It is too much of a good thing; nothing in the world can justify a metaphysic of that order, and not therefore the sign called 'Jesus of Nazareth', isolated, so hard to decipher, so inadequately supported by history. To erect so magnificent a structure on such flimsy foundations is to go beyond the bounds of reason.

*-Hans Urs Von Balthasar 1905-1988
Love Alone pp.83-84*

3rd Reading: [Revelation 21:1-6](#)

What do you think of John's description of the new heaven and new earth? What are the characteristics of this new heaven and earth? What is the significance of God now dwelling with humanity? How might this new heaven and new earth give hope to those who were told about this vision? How does the change take place from the old earth and old heaven to the new earth and new heaven? Why doesn't God simply replace them rather than transform them into something new? Why are people so hesitant to change? What usually has to take place in order for people to be willing to change? Do you look forward to a day when all things are made new? Why or why not? How can we, as people who resist change, open ourselves up to being changed by God on a daily basis? [Faith Element](#)

4th Reading: [John 13:31-35](#)

What people are easy for you to love? What people are hard for you to love? Who do you spend most of your time and energy giving love to? What does Jesus say about the glory that he and his Father receive? When are they being glorified? What does Jesus call his disciples in verse 33? What does the use of this phrase, "little children" tell you about the love Jesus has for his disciples? Did John learn and model the love of Jesus in his life? Do the disciples understand or comprehend that Jesus is going away? If you were one of the disciples, would you have understood what was about to happen to Jesus? Would you have gotten it? What kind of love does Jesus have for people? How did he demonstrate his love? What does Jesus say about how the world will recognize his disciples? How does your love for others impact their life? [Eagle Christian Church](#)