

Sermon preached by Beth Hilgartner  
May 10, 2015 at Immanuel, Bellows Falls

Acts 10:44-48  
I John 5:1-6  
John 15:9-17

God be in my words and in my speaking; God be in our hearts and in our understanding. Amen.

The lessons appointed for today, the 6th Sunday of Easter, give us strong messages about inclusion and love. The lesson from the Acts of the Apostles recounts the end of the encounter between Peter and Cornelius the Centurion. What Peter was “still saying” as the appointed part of our story begins, started out with the familiar passage: “Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.” And as the Holy Spirit was poured out on Cornelius the Centurion and his household (Gentiles, and — from the Jewish perspective — worse yet: Romans), Peter makes his case that they should be baptized. “Can any one forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” This was a pivotal moment in the story of the emerging Christian movement, as it marks the point Peter discerns that the good news of the Gospel is intended for *everyone*, and not just for “the circumcised.” In the passage from the first letter of

John, we hear more of John's theology about the power of believing in Christ, and of the responsibility of being born of God. "For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome, for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith." And finally, in the Gospel lesson, Jesus sums up what it means to keep his commandments by saying: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."

Loving our neighbors as Jesus loved us is even *more* difficult, I think, than loving our neighbors as ourselves. For many of us, loving ourselves is something we have to work at. Recognizing and accepting our weaknesses, avoiding the traps of destructive self-criticism, and being patient with ourselves are all part of knowing and loving ourselves; and it is that kind of love — open-eyed but also open-hearted — which we are called to embody in our relationships with others.

But we aren't always good at loving ourselves; and we aren't always able to extend even that imperfect manifestation of love of self to others. If we take it one step further, and use as our model the love Christ showed us (instead of the less-than-perfect love we have for ourselves), then it becomes that much more difficult. We have to remember that loving one another is not a mind game; it isn't that we have to think nice thoughts about one another. Rather, we must

treat one another with respect and dignity, gentleness and forbearance, tolerance and acceptance — just as Christ showed us; just as Christ loves us. Further, if we are to love one another as Christ loved us, we must *know* one another; that is, we must see each other honestly, for Christ sees us and knows us — complete with our faults and failings, as well as our strengths and potential. Christ sees us, and knows us, and loves us anyway.

God knows this task is hard enough even if we limit the people we think of as “one another” to our friends, family, and members of our community; in short, those with whom we already have much in common. But the lesson from the Acts of the Apostles makes it clear that God doesn’t expect us to make the task of loving one another easier by limiting whom we include in the phrase “one another.” For Peter, and the other circumcised believers with him, the circle is dramatically widened to include everyone. Despite expectations (and there were expectations — strong ones — that the Messiah was only for the Jewish people), the Holy Spirit is poured out upon Cornelius and his household, despite the fact that they are Gentiles (and Romans). “The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out *even on the Gentiles...*” Notice that word, “even.” The shock the

circumcised believers must have felt would be like the shock we might feel, if it were (say) terrorists or drug dealers, instead of Gentiles, who received the Holy Spirit. But the shock is the point. God loves every human being, and longs for each and every one of us to recognize and accept the Divine love that is offered to each person. In the Epistle lesson, John reminds us that the way we express our love of God is by obeying God's commandments, which "are not burdensome;" in the Gospel, Jesus calls us to love one another as he loved us; and through the lesson in Acts, God (who "shows no partiality") challenges us to consider all people our brothers and sisters in God.

It isn't always easy to love one another, but it is important. I remember being puzzled as a child by the apparent lack of consequences in Christianity. I expected it to be: "Love one another — or God will GET you!" but retribution simply doesn't seem to be God's way. Instead, we are challenged to do what may seem impossible; and when we fail, all that is required is that we pick ourselves up, ask for forgiveness, and go back to trying. Christianity isn't something we attain in Baptism and then forget about; rather, we work at it all our lives — often failing in one or another aspect. Faith is a process, not a state; a verb, not a

noun. And we can try, and try, and try again to live up to our Christianity, and even if we don't succeed, we are still forgiven, valued, and loved.

So if it doesn't matter whether or not we succeed at faith, then why should we bother with it? Precisely because it is a process and not a state; precisely because in making the effort to love, and allowing ourselves to be loved, we learn important, life-transforming things about ourselves and about God. In last week's selection from the first letter of John, we were told, "Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love." So it becomes our responsibility to help others to know God by loving them — and in that process, to deepen our own knowledge of and relationship with God. One of my seminary professors was fond of saying: "How can we expect someone to love God when he or she has never experienced even human love? It's meaningless to tell people that God loves them, if they don't understand what the verb means. The Good News loses its power if it isn't intelligible."

Some years ago, I saw an amazing example of the power of love. I was boarding my horse at a barn that had a number of teenagers who kept their horses there. In the summer, these kids hung out at the barn, helping each other get ready for shows and competitions, trail riding, doing chores (often without even being asked), and generally supporting one another and behaving like a model of good community. Into this situation came a twelve-year-old boy whose

guardian signed him up for riding lessons. George was a pretty troubled kid: not friendly; prone to outburst of anger; sarcastic and obstructive. His guardian would drop him off on his lesson days, and leave him at the stable for most of the day; unlike the other kids, he was never willing to help out with chores, and spent a lot of time being unhappy, acting bored, and making unkind comments directed at the other kids. I (and the other adults) were generally not targeted in his outbursts, but we watched, somewhat helplessly, as the older kids tried — unsuccessfully — to include him in their group. One day, Josh (one of the older boys) came to me to ask what they should do about George. “He’s so mean,” Josh said. “We’ve tried to be nice, but it doesn’t seem to make any difference. My mom says it’s the Christian thing to keep trying to be nice to him, but I’m so mad and frustrated, I’d like to pound him.”

“I hear you,” I said. “But it’s probably not the best strategy. When you’re trying to get your horse on the trailer, and he doesn’t want to go, does it help when you get mad?”

“No,” Josh said. “Sometimes I get mad, anyway; but it never helps if I *act* mad.

Usually, if Victor doesn’t want to get on the trailer, it’s because he’s worried. If I get mad, then it just convinces him something’s really wrong.”

“Right. I think it’s the same thing with George,” I said. “If you get mad, he’ll just get madder, and he’ll feel vindicated. You know: ‘I knew all along you guys were really mean underneath.’ So just do what you do with your horse. Be patient and reassuring. If George yells at you, don’t yell back; just stay cool and remember that he’s *trying* to get you to lose your temper. Just keep treating him the way you’d want to be treated; and give him some time to figure out that there’s nothing to be afraid of.”

Of course, it wasn’t that simple, but the older kids were really great. If George blew up and yelled, they’d say, “I’m sorry I upset you,” and leave it at that. They kept offering to include him in whatever they were doing, even when he consistently rebuffed them. They shared their lunches (George’s guardian often forgot to pack a lunch), even when George only accepted things grudgingly and with many complaints about whatever was offered. But slowly, incrementally,

George's outbursts became less frequent. And another thing began to happen.

George started to bond with the pony he rode in his lessons. She was a really great school pony — the kind of horse that understands her job is to take care of her rider and make sure he learns what he needs to know. And George started to love her. He saw how the other kids gave their horses treats, scratched their itchy spots, fussed over them with curry combs and brushes, took them out for grazing, talked to them; and gradually, he started to do the same things with Cadence. In the two years that he and I were both at the barn, I saw a truly amazing transformation in that child. He learned about love, acceptance, and friendship; the older kids were patient, and kind, and welcoming long enough so that George was able to trust they were genuine; he got to be quite a competent rider, and learned how to be supportive to others. In fact, as the older kids moved on to college, he helped to form the nucleus of the next generation of great high-school kids at the barn. Other than the occasional conversation with me (as the resident expert on all things religious), no one talked much about God or love; but those kids put love into action; and George learned powerful, transformative lessons from them, and from the horses.

So maybe that's our job: to love others so that in and through that relationship we may all come to know and love God more completely. We need to love even those we don't like, or understand, even those who are very different from us, even those with whom we do not agree. Like the kids at the barn, we need to



love others, even in the face of rejection or hostility. We need to understand and remember that love is more (a lot more!) than thinking nice thoughts about people. Love — the love Christ modeled for us — is unconditional: so we must strive to love without expecting people to be grateful, or requiring them to reciprocate. And the grace is that when we do this, when we work at loving one another, when we participate in the process of our faith, *we* grow; God works in us and through us. Our community is strengthened, our own lives and the lives of those around us are enriched; and God is made present in a world which badly needs that.

It is my prayer for all of us, this morning, that we will find ways to express Christ-like love to all with whom we come in contact; and that through our witness and example, others will come to know and to love our God and Lord.

In the name of Christ,

AMEN.