

May I speak in the name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

There's a story I've heard recently of two men who used to go out raccoon hunting. Not an English past-time, but popular over here I hear in parts. Anyway, one of them, Jim, was a much better shot than the other one, Tony. John used to boast that he could always hit a raccoon with a single shot from his 22. Tony got tired of hearing this so he decided to play a trick on Jim. He adjusted the sites on his gun so that he always shot a little low. The prank worked. The next time they went out hunting, they got a signal that the dogs had chased the raccoon up a tree, Jim took aim and missed. Couldn't believe it. He took aim again, missed again. Hit the branch that the raccoon was sitting on. He shot a couple more times, and he missed a couple more times.

Jim's frustration grew and the raccoon became more and more nervous. It started to run down the tree. It ran across the ground towards Tony. It then jumped at him, ran up his leg and perched on his head. Jim now saw his opportunity. He said to Tony, stand still, I've got it in my sites. Tony saw the 22 aiming at his head and began to scream, "Aim higher! Aim higher!"

That story may or may not be true, but it does serve to introduce the theme of my sermon this week, which is based on six words in the Gospel. "I give you a new commandment. Love one another just as I have loved you." The six words I'm picking up this morning are these, "Just as I have loved you," Jesus said. What Jesus is saying isn't just love one another, but to love as he loved. The bar couldn't be set any higher. I don't think we could be called to aim any higher than that: the loving as Jesus himself loved. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.

Love is much easier to talk about at an abstract level. It's easy to talk about our love of nature, or humanity, or on this Earth Sunday, our love of the planet. I'd suggest it's much more difficult to love and express love on a micro level. It's less clear what it means to love in the course of our everyday life, lived amongst the people who we're familiar with.

I've had the words of Jesus in my head all this week as I've been preparing this sermon. It's been an interesting week. I've had a great variety of experiences. I want to just offer you today some reflections of how those words of Jesus have felt to me as I've gone about this

interesting week that I've experienced. I want to pass on how I've seen Jesus' commandment lived out in real life.

First, let me say something about the context of our Gospel reading. It's taken from John's detailed accounts of The Last Supper. The chapter it's from Chapter 13 begins with a story of Jesus washing his disciples' feet. The disciples were shocked because this was normally something done by a servant. Jesus had taken off his robe, tied a towel around his waist and carried a basin of water around the disciples, stooping down to wash their feet. This points to the fact that when Jesus says, "Love one another," he's not saying, "I want you to develop warm fuzzy feelings for each other." The love he's talking about here is an action word. Many of you will know there are four words for love in the New Testament, in the original Greek, and the one that Jesus is using here is the word *agape*. It's an action word.

In the New Testament, love is used as a noun 110 times, and as a verb 137 times. When Jesus says, "Love one another," he's saying, "Put that love into action just as I have acted out my love for you." The first characteristic of the love of Jesus, the love that he's calling us to is that it leads to action. Loving one another in this passage is very close to serving one another. One thing I've noticed in my few weeks as an Episcopalian is that ours is a tradition which has grasped that fact. Episcopalians are by nature, keen to work their love out in action. I've seen that in a couple of places this week. On Tuesday I went to the food pantry at St. Mark's Church in City Heights. You may have noticed that every week we collect food and it gets brought up to the altar, so I thought I'd go and see what happens to that food. I was very pleased to find out where it goes. It goes to St. Mark's and they do a great job there. There's a woman there called Heather, who's fantastic, and on very limited resources seems to be able to find a way of distributing the food to the people who most need it.

Then, on Wednesday, I went to the Episcopal Church Center in Ocean Beach to lead an outside Eucharist for the homeless, which again, was a great experience. There were about 100 people who were fed there. There were nurses to cater to people's medical needs. There were clothes and shoes, and it was great to see all that happening. I'm delighted that we support such things. It's love in action. It's an example of how we can aim higher by stooping lower to serve.

Loving like Jesus loved can be costly. If self preservation is the first law of physical life, then self sacrifice is the first law of spiritual life. Loving our neighbor is working for their well-being, even if it means sacrificing something of our own well-being. Remember what Jesus said, "Greater love than this hath no one than that they lay down their life for their friends." Jesus didn't just say that. He lived it out. Love is not an abstract concept. Love is lived out in daily life.

I hope that that can be true to, more and more in the life of our own community. I'd like to think that what Jesus says in Verse 35, at the end of that Gospel, of his disciples, will be true of us. Jesus said, "By this love, everyone will know that you are my disciples if you have love, one for another."

I've mentioned in the Sea Breeze today, you'll notice as you read that, that recently I've met with some of the people in our church who were concerned for pastoral care: the way they reach out and show love to those in need. Perhaps those are lonely, or isolated, or who are ill, people who have gone into hospital. We decided that if we're to make real progress in this area, we need to improve our communication. We need to make sure that we know who we should be in contact with and we need your help in that: if you know neighbors of yours who are ill, or who've gone into hospital, or people in church who aren't in the pew because they're not very well, or they're shut in at home. Unless somebody tells us, we don't know.

The first thing we're trying to do is to build a network of communication. Tell me or someone in the office and we'll make sure that we reach out to those in need as an expression of the love that we have for one another. I think we're making progress here. I hope it continues. I'm praying that St. James will be known for the love that exists between its members and the kindness that we show to one another. Please join with me so that it may be said of us, that by this, everyone in La Jolla will know that we are Jesus' disciples because of the love we have for one another.

So much for actions. Secondly and more briefly, another characteristic of the love that Jesus showed is that it was a love that crossed boundaries. The disciples who Jesus is talking here are a very diverse group. They're held together by love. There is no one outside the bounds of God's love. I had to remind myself of that on Tuesday when I had discovered my bike had been

stolen. God loves even the person who stole my bike. In the reading we had from Acts today, we see that the church has always had to learn and to struggle with working out the call to be inclusive, to reflect the all encompassing nature of Jesus' love. Saint Peter had to be given this powerful vision from God of which we read, and actually which is a repeat. This story is so important it comes twice in the book of Acts: That in order to make Peter change his mind, and to realize that the Gentiles really should be included in God's church, Peter had to be spoken to directly in a vision.

I was struck by what it says in Verse 12, in the middle of that passage. Peter's told, there shall be no distinction between them and us. Love means there is no them, and no us, in Christ Jesus. We always need to be working to ensure that that's the case amongst us. Earlier in the week I sat down and had a long coffee with an African American woman who no longer worships with us who told me something of her experience at St. James. She told me that she sometimes felt, as a black person, that she was one of them, as opposed to one of us, white people. We need to be sensitive to that, to continue to make sure that that doesn't happen because we're aiming high. We're aiming high to love like Jesus whose love knows no boundaries, whose love unites the most diverse of people.

Mother Teresa visited Phoenix in 1989 to open a home for the destitute. During that brief visit, she was interviewed by the local radio station. In a private moment off-air the announcer asked Mother Teresa if there was anything he could do for her. He was expecting her to request a contribution or some sort of media exposure to the new home she was opening, but instead she replied, "Yes there is something you can do for me. Find somebody that nobody else loves, and love them." That's an invitation to put love into action and to love across boundaries: two qualities that we've seen were characteristic of the nature of Jesus' love for his people. We're to aim high and to love one another just as Jesus has loved us.

I've offered here some reflections on how I've experienced love this week. In this coming week, I want to try harder to love as Jesus loved so that I may aim higher by stooping lower. Amen.