

Sermon for May 15., 2022

## **LOVE AND GLORY**

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Today is the fifth Sunday of Easter, and perhaps this would be a good time to remind ourselves what the Easter season as a whole represents. The lectionary gives us a clue on each of these seven Sundays. All the other weeks of the year, the first reading from the lectionary is a selection from the Old Testament, from Genesis or Exodus or Job or one of the OT prophets.

But during the Easter season, the first lectionary reading always comes, as ours did today, from the New Testament Book of Acts. The thought in the mind of the people who put together the lectionary as suggested readings for all Christian churches is pretty clear: they want to bring home the point that the fundamental meaning of Easter for all Christians everywhere is that the Easter events – the Crucifixion, the Resurrection and the Ascension – remade the world, made it new again. The Easter events weren't just things that happened like everything else that ever happened. The Easter events were themselves a new creation, just like the first one when God said: Let there be light. One thousand nine hundred and ninety-two years ago, the world was remade, this time in the image of Christ. You, me, everyone here, everyone everywhere lives in a different world from the one that existed prior to the events of Easter.

But how is it different?

The reading from Acts gives us one illustration. At some point very early on, Peter while traveling is granted a vision, and that vision is associated with another experience in which Peter becomes convinced that the good news of Jesus Christ was to include the non-Jewish world as well as the Jewish.

As an historical event, that was of course an important moment in the great historical movement of Christianity out of Israel and into the rest of the world, a movement that continues even today. But the deeper Easter meaning it reflects is the brotherhood and sisterhood of all humankind in Christ. What used to be called the Family of Man is not simply a genetic ancestry; in Christ's new creation, it is literally true. In and through Christ, we are all literally brothers and sisters with

one another, as siblings of Christ and children of God. Family IS something different and far greater on Christ's new Easter creation than it was before.

And that brings us to our Gospel reading for today. So let's read it together.

Read. John 13:31-35

*When he had gone out, Jesus said,  
"Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has  
been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him,  
God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at  
once. Little 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.' I give  
you a new commandment, that you love one another.  
Just as I have loved you, you also should love one  
another. By this everyone will know that you are my  
disciples, if you have love for one another."*

The passage from John really has two topics, glory and love, and in John's usual style, the teaching of Jesus seems almost enigmatic and elusive, as if he is using familiar words in unfamiliar ways. And I think that's not far off the mark. What Jesus is doing is using the words in the senses that they will have in his new creation, not necessarily the senses they have in our old familiar way of thinking.

Consider glory. What comes to our mind when we think or speak of someone or something having glory or being glorious or giving glory to someone?

Well, we think of it as being something high and mighty and wondrous, don't we? Something grand. Edgar Allen Poe in his poem called To Helen famously wrote of "the glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome." We call our flag "Ol' Glory" because it's flown as the standard of victorious armies in historic wars, and people cheer and salute when it passes by in parades.

Our Bible itself frequently uses glory in this way. "The heavens declare the glory of God," the Psalmist tells us, and uses the image of the night sky, the most magnificent sight imaginable, to compare to God's glory. We sing Glory, glory hallelujah when we are picturing God as the vanquishing hero marching on through to victory in the Battle Hymn of the Republic.

And so on and so on. In our ordinary way of thinking, glory always involves something big, something awe-inspiring, something bright and shiny and historic, something that stirs our ordinary human awe and pride.

But then, what are we to make of the words of our Lord that John provides in our passage for today? “Now the son of God is glorified, and God is glorified in him?”

Immediately before our passage, Jesus has sent Judas away from their company, out into the night, to begin the process of betrayal that will end later that night in Jesus’s arrest, and in the morning, in his crucifixion. And yet Jesus says of that moment, the moment at which his terrible death on the cross becomes inevitable, that now, in that moment, he is glorified, and God is glorified in him.

But what is it about this act, this self-condemnation to a hideous and humiliating and pathetic death on a cross that brings glory both to the son and to the father?

It is not the cross itself; the cross is an instrument of torture and death. Nor is it Christ’s choice of the cross; in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus pleaded with his Father to choose another way. But that moment in Gethsemane, I think, gives us the answer. His prayer to his father concludes with the words: “Not my will, but yours be done.”

When Jesus says “Now is the Son Glorified,” what he’s referring to is not the heroism of dying on the cross, but rather the perfection and purity of his obedience to God. And in phrasing it that way, what Jesus does is to give a new meaning to what a glorious act is, in the world of his new creation. In Christ’s world, which is the seed of heaven on earth, glory will not be found only in heroic deeds and monumental achievements; but that true human glory consists in willing obedience to God’s will.

What does this mean for us? Just as in God’s new creation, we are in literal fact brothers and sisters one with another, so also, in God’s new creation, true glory is to be found wherever and whenever we find willing and willful cooperation with God’s own purposes. In our new creation, anytime I hold my tongue rather than spread a word of delicious gossip, every time I turn the other cheek, every time I show kindness or mercy or generosity in absolute anonymity, perhaps most of all, every time I forgive my sister or brother – any of my heavenly sisters or brothers, that is to say, anytime I forgive anyone – I am glorious in God’s eyes, and in so doing, I glorify God Himself.

And just as glory gains new meaning in Christ's new creation, so also with love.

If the new meaning of glory is willing obedience to God, so the new meaning of love is willing, sacrificial service to others.

In the old creation, love refers mainly to some quality of the emotional life. Rhett Butler loves Scarlett O'Hara says something about Rhett's emotional attitudinal makeup. A child loves her mother says something about the trust and affection she feels towards this one particular person. The classic love story is one in which two people develop particular feelings towards one another.

When Jesus tells his followers: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another", he's not telling them to develop overpowering feelings of affection for one another. How could anyone obey such a command? Our feelings aren't subject to our voluntary control? And there is no indication anywhere in our Gospel accounts that Jesus had such feelings for everyone he met.

What Jesus instead shows us throughout the Gospel accounts is a new meaning for what we call love. The meaning of love in Christ's new creation, the meaning that he modeled in his relationship with everyone he met, is that of willful, sacrificial service to them.

"As I have loved you, you also love one another." He gives them this commandment at the moment he seals his own death on the cross, the ultimate example of willful, sacrificial service.

Does this mean that we are all to sacrifice our lives for others? No, of course not. His death on the cross was not the definition of love, it was a model of love at the extreme of the human existence. "Greater love than this has no one" he says elsewhere, "that he lay down his life for his friends." Final and complete self-sacrifice for others is not the extreme of affection; it's the extreme of what love means in Christ's new creation, which is heaven on earth.

"So the first shall be last, and the last first" in the heavenly kingdom he is creating on earth, Jesus informs us on another occasion, and he's not teaching that someday our social roles will be switched. He's teaching us that glory and love have new meaning in the new creation.

We don't need to read history or go to the movies to find examples of great glory and love. I see examples of it every day, often right here in this church. I'll close by telling you about one I witnessed just the other day in the hospice residence. It

was once of the aides at the hospice residence. She's a young woman with a nasty temper and definite need to shed a few pounds. I can pretty much guarantee that there will never be any parades in her honor, and no one will ever erect a statue in her honor on her hometown square and her name will never echo down the corridors of history.

On this particular occasion a few days back, I happened to be walking down the hall in the residence, and I heard soft singing coming from one of the rooms. I recognized her voice. The aide was inside, cleaning the bedpan and changing the Depends for one of the residents, and singing as she did so, obviously to distract the resident from the embarrassment of the situation. She'll never know that I was standing outside the room, listening to her sing, and thinking that she was probably the most glorious and loving person in that building at that moment. And I testify to you here today that Jesus was undoubtedly standing alongside me, and having the same thought.

And so, heavenly Father, our prayer for this morning is that we learn the new vocabulary, and that we incorporate it into our estimation of all those we meet, when we reckon their glory and their love, because that's the vocabulary Jesus used, and we pray in his name.