

Welcome, everyone, as we gather again to make our offering of worship to God. A special welcome to anyone who is new to us here at St. Gabriel's, or even new to a Catholic church. We are all at different places on this pilgrimage, so wherever you are on your path of discipleship, we are glad to have you with us as we strive to grow together.

Today's gospel has some nice, feel-good lines. "As the Father loves me, so I love you." "I no longer call you slaves; I call you friends." "This is my commandment: love one another." A talented artist could compose a nice hymn with those verses, which is fine. We have been told, however, that discipleship can be demanding, and when we take today's gospel at face value, we see just how demanding it can be.

"This is my commandment: Love one another as I have loved you." "If you keep my commandment, you will remain in my love." That is what Jesus says. If we want to remain in his love, we must love one another as he has loved us. And how did Jesus love us? As he says, "There is no greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends." That is the commandment Christ has given us. Of course, that can be very difficult to do. We are fallen human beings who are prone to weakness, to say the least. We can trust that God's mercy is always there for us when we recognize how we have fallen short of this commandment and ask for

forgiveness. It's not "one strike and you're out." No, as often as we come to him, acknowledge that we have sinned and ask for forgiveness, we will be forgiven and have a fresh start.

But it can be tempting to take that for granted and so not take this commandment seriously. An important question for us is whether we accept that we have to try to love others the way Jesus loved us. Because that's probably not the standard we usually use. We have the natural tendency to judge ourselves by comparing ourselves to those around us. "How am I doing compared to my neighbor? How am I doing compared to those I see on the news? How am I doing compared to society in general?" We do this for a variety of reasons, most obviously because we can usually say, "I'm doing pretty good. I might not be the *most* loving person I know, but I'm top five, top ten at worst."

But the commandment does not read: love one another better than average. The comparison he calls us to make is not to our fellow sinners, but to himself. "Love one another as I have loved you. If you follow my commandment, you will remain in my love."

Well that's... hard. Our objections to this can come rather easily. "How can it be that Jesus commands me to love as he loved? He's God, I'm not. He may have been able to forgive those who killed him even as he hung upon the cross, he may

have been able to love Judas even as he betrayed him, but that's not fair. He's God. How can he expect *me* to do that, knowing that I am a fallen human being?" That reaction is perfectly understandable.

But it is a long-held belief in the Catholic Church that God does not command the impossible. To do so would be unjust. "I command you to do what you cannot do, and if you don't do it, you will be punished." No, if God commands us to do something, then by necessity, it must be doable. If God is just, which we believe He is, and He commands us to love one another as he has loved us, then we must be capable of living up to that standard. It is not impossible to love each other the way Jesus loved us. It must be that if *we* hung upon a cross, we, too, could forgive those doing it. It must be that if *we* knew we were being betrayed by one of our closest friends, we, too, could still love him. In giving us this commandment, Christ is opening our eyes to the potential we have to love.

How do we live up to this potential? How do we love as Christ loved? "Remain in me, and I will remain in you," he tells us. To live up to our potential, we must tap into the love that God has for us and continually turn to Him and say, "Lord, help me, I cannot do this on my own." We have to make space for His divine love to enter us and flow through us. Ultimately, *any* love that we show is simply us sharing in God's love, because all love comes from God. And He is not going to

put a limit on how much love He shares with us. The power that allowed Jesus to forgive sinners and love his enemies is available to us if we let down our guard, open our hearts to God's love, and allow it to transform them into hearts that are ready to forgive, ready to love.

Now that can be a scary thing. Loving those around us means making ourselves vulnerable to being hurt, just as Jesus did. And since we are all fallen human beings, we know that others will sometimes take advantage of that, just as they did with him. But that must not stop us. We must not allow the pain that others can cause us lead us to closing our hearts to the love God wants to pour into us. That is not the path of discipleship that Christ calls us to follow.

Your potential to love is infinite. You can love others the way Jesus loves you. Let us go to the Lord, invite Him to fill our hearts with His love, and then show the world the greatest love there is.