

115th Council of the Diocese of West Texas

Walk in love as Christ loved us

Introduction to the Theme & Bible Study

Thursday, February 21, 2019

“Walk in love as Christ loved us” from Ephesians 5:2 is our Council theme, as well as the Bible verse that will help illumine and shape our mission and ministries this year. Throughout Council, we’ll connect this passage with our Presiding Bishop’s “Way of Love,” seven spiritual practices to strengthen our discipleship and help us do the work of the Kingdom.

“Walking in love” begins easily enough, especially as we no doubt bask in the glow of last week’s Valentine’s Day. Who wouldn’t want to do that? But “Walk in love” is followed immediately by “as Christ loved us,” and so we need to consider the quality of that love: How does Christ love us? What does that love look like?

After we hear, “Walk in love as Christ loved us,” the verse is brought to a sharp point, “and gave himself up for us, an offering and sacrifice to God.” For St. Paul, the deepest and truest expression of love is found in the Word-made-flesh, Jesus Christ, who embodies fully the love of God, and reveals the source of all love worthy of the name.

In one of the beautiful Collects in Morning Prayer, we pray, “Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross, that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace.” (BCP, p. 101) Here is what true love looks like – it gives itself away, and offers itself generously.

We need to pull back a bit and look at the preceding verse (v. 1), which reads, “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children.” The verse claims we are “beloved children” and says that we’re to imitate God as children learn from watching and imitating their parents.

But pulling back further into the larger context of Ephesians, we find that, at the beginning of chapter four, we're exhorted to "lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all." (4:1-6) Sound familiar? That's what we say at every baptism. By water and the Spirit, we become the restored and beloved children of the God who frees us to imitate him.

If there's an exhortation to live a certain way, then there's an exhortation to not live other ways. St. Paul talks about shedding "the old nature" of sin and death and putting on "the new nature" of life in Christ. This isn't easy, we know, as we are at home with our old nature, like comfortable old clothes. But I'm pretty sure the Lord who loves us and gave himself for us has not written in the yearbook of my life, "To a nice boy. Never change!" I'm pretty sure he hasn't written that in your yearbook, either.

With our God-given identity comes ethics, and with faith come habits and practices. Imitating God...walking in love... means living and behaving in some identifiable ways. Later in chapter 4, just before we hear "Be imitators," Paul writes this: "Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may impart grace to those who hear...Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you." (4:29-32)

I'll have reason to remind you of this in my Address tomorrow. But for now marvel that the awesome and mysterious love of God is revealed in daily human acts of kindness, forgiveness, swallowing ugly, hurtful words. I find myself saying a lot that people – including church people – need to give each other a break. But the break we all need may look like Love itself broken and poured out on the cross, like the Bread and

the Body broken at the altar, the sacrifice of Love made for love of us and the whole world.

Yes, of course, we want to walk in love, as Christ loved us. But where are we going and who will we be with? Who will we be walking toward? Is all this walking in love stuff like a walk in the park? Or a forced march? Like a hike, or a 5K walk for a cause? Is it like taking your 40-pound untrained puppy around the neighborhood?

I can clarify this for you.

Yes. It's like all those things, and more. When Jesus says, "Follow me," or "I am the way, the truth and the life," or "Take up your cross and come after me," he doesn't then say, "And here's today's itinerary." He says, "Come on, let's go."

With the Apostle Thomas, we might complain, "Lord, we don't know where you are going. How can we know the way?" But Thomas kept showing up, kept walking, and along the way, he learned that Jesus is the Way. We do know where we are going with him: this way, toward the Kingdom. How we are going, in this meantime, may not be clear. But we know our destination and discover that even now it lights the road we are on. So we know...and we don't know...this way, and following Jesus is an adventure.

And we are not expected to walk this way alone. We are part of the Body of Christ—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, remember?—and we are given companions and friends for this journey. Here's one, encouraging us along this Way of Love.

(Michael Curry video)

When I was 16, my parents put me and an Army surplus duffle bag on a Continental Trailways bus in Brownsville and sent me to Camp Capers. You of a more tender age may be shocked to hear of such reckless parenting, or maybe to hear that there was a time when you could get through a week at Capers with only a duffle bag. Such treatment was nothing new to me. When I was 12, they put me on a plane by myself to Tampico. My return was on an overnight bus. I think when you have six kids, you're more willing to play the odds.

Anyway, I knew where I was going, sort of. The bus took me to downtown San Antonio, where I was picked up by two people I'd never met, college students in a VW Beetle, who drove me to camp, which in those days was close to El Paso. I was going to be a counselor—a Junior Counselor back then—for the first time. I knew where I was going and what I'd be doing. But not really. I had no idea what I would find there: the way of love I would encounter; the boldly joyful Christian community I was accepted into just because I showed up; or the stirring of my young heart wanting to know more about following Jesus, even though I think I'd been following him most of my life. I knew and didn't know where all this might lead, so that five years later, I found myself still going that way and, on a June night in St. Francis Chapel, I heard God calling me to be a priest.

We know where we are going, and we don't. But walking in love as Christ loves us, we find ourselves—find our truest selves—on this adventure of a lifetime, which is eternal life beginning now.

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Take some time now at your tables to consider together what “walking in love as Christ loved us” might mean back home, in and from your churches. Discuss one or more of these questions:

- 1) Is there encouragement and hope for you in this passage? What are the challenges and obstacles?
- 2) To whom in your community can you imagine Christ leading you or your church as you walk in love? Who do you need to go with you?
- 3) Recall a time when you “knew and didn't know” where you were going. What was it like? Where would you say God was in that time?

