

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the one who binds us together in love, Jesus Christ our Lord, amen.

When I was in the Air Force I deployed three times within a short couple of years. I went to Egypt for almost 3 months. Then less than a year later I went to Saudi Arabia for 8 months. Shortly after returning from Saudi the Air Force sent me to Professional Military education for 2 months and when I returned from Squadron Officer's School they sent me again to the headquarters of another major joint military exercise in Norfolk Virginia. Not all of these deployments and temporary duty stations were hardships. When I was at the headquarters in Norfolk I was stationed at a major Navy Base and the conditions were far better than they were in either the tent city of Egypt or Saudi Arabia. The hardest part about any of those times was being separated from my family. Actually, my Air Force career started out being separated for 3 months while I attended Officer Training School. Every time I had to leave my family I experienced the same feelings of loss and grieving. The first few days or even a week or so I remember walking around in a fog. It was like I was out of my body. I was watching myself go through all the actions of each day, but I wasn't really there. My heart wasn't in it for quite a while. It was a very hard adjustment being away from PJ and my children who were young at the time.

I think about how John must have felt when he was exiled to the island of Patmos. John, who wrote the Gospel according to John was likely the same John who sat alone, separated from all those he loved, exiled on account of his witness to the Good News of Jesus Christ. I wonder if those feelings of loneliness led him to his out of body experience when he received the vision that he recorded as the Book of Revelation. One small phrase gives me a clue to John's feelings as he lives in isolation on that island. Notice he says "for the sea was no more!"

John is saying something very significant in those few words. He's speaking about separation, he is speaking about the sea separating him from his loved ones, friends, his books, Christian fellowship, separation from the land where Jesus walked and lived, separation from all that made life bearable for John. So, John says very clearly that heaven will be a place where there will be no more separation. There will be completeness, a togetherness, a union of all things.

John found in his vision a promise from God that through the power of the resurrection, through the salvation won for us by Jesus Christ, each person will experience a sense of closure, or completeness in life. Unions and reunions will take place. People will be fully reconciled, answers to the why questions of life will be answered. A trusting faith in Christ will be brought to its completion. When heaven comes to earth healing will take place in all the broken areas 'of life, and perfect love will allow everyone to be a brother and sister to each person and a

perfect child to God. All this will happen in this new dwelling place where God will dwell among God's people. Did you also notice this time of perfect unity will happen right here on earth? Followers of Christ aren't taken up in the clouds or anywhere else. God comes down to earth. God always comes down to us...

All of us live now with a bit or a lot of separation in our lives. We can be separated from God through our sin, separated from ourselves through the brokenness of this world. We can be separated from each other through our unwillingness to love others as we love ourselves. We can be separated due to our own actions or because of the actions of others beyond our direct control. All this separation leaves us living our lives in that same fog I experienced in those first days after leaving my family when I deployed to far away places. Separation isn't a fun thing! Maybe that's why my all time top favorite Bible verse is Matthew 28:20. These were Jesus last words to his disciples as he was about to ascend into heaven. He told them to remember, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Because we can trust in Christ now to be with us always we are free to live our lives, knowing that the separations we experience now aren't forever. Jesus tells us in our gospel lesson one way we can experience the new heaven and new earth now, is to love one another.

John saw in his vision the new heaven and the new earth. In this heaven coming to earth we find the completeness of love. Jesus tells us in the gospel

lesson that loving one another is the most complete way to live. He's not talking about some fleeting emotional love, but agape love. Agape love is always an action and never just a mere feeling. Agape leads us to serve our neighbors. It's the basis for our own Mission Statement here at Trinity. In Christ's love (that's Agape Love), we seek, welcome and serve all. Did you notice that seeking, welcoming, and serving are all action words? With Christ, love leads to a life of action.

Love is all around us. Love is the only way to live completely in Christ. Did you know Jesus gave only two commandments in the New Testament? One about loving God and the other is this one about loving each other. The commandments are written in different versions in different places in the New Testament, but essentially, they are alike. He commands us to love. When Lutherans hear the word command we know what Jesus means. We believe that we live not by the demands of the law, but by the grace of God. So, why does he command us to love? Why does he order us to love one another?

Notice who Jesus was addressing when he gave this commandment. He was addressing his disciples, people who were already part of his family, people who had already experienced his grace first hand. These were people who were already in a relationship to him. The new command has nothing to do with eternal life or becoming a child of God. Christ has forgiven us and given us life before we even

thought of obeying him. The new command does not tell us, “Do this if you want to be saved,” but rather, “Do this if you want to glorify God who has already saved you by his grace”. Do this if you want to praise God, do this if you want to serve God. It’s not a command to qualify us for the kingdom. It’s a command to us who are already members of God’s family. This is the only place in the Bible where Jesus addresses his disciples as “little children.” He’s speaking to them as part of the family, not as people who are seeking admission. He is not telling them how to become members, but how we are to act *as* family members.

Why does Jesus command us to love? First, because God loved us so much. I think there’s another reason as well. Jesus knew that when people care about the mission they are working to accomplish there would be conflict and disagreement. I notice Jesus didn’t command us to never disagree. He knew that would be part and parcel of doing the work of the Gospel. We would all have our own opinions on how to best accomplish the job at hand. It’s not about always agreeing on everything, it’s about always loving despite everything. As we work out our disagreements on how to do the mission we are to work it out in love. God, through Christ, has loved us and we are commanded to reflect that love to those around us, especially to those closest to us.

An old proverb says familiarity breeds contempt. I’ve witnessed how this works out first hand. When I was deployed to Egypt we lived and worked in a

small tent city. My team was the first to arrive and the last to leave when the mission was over. I got to experience the build-up of troops and saw how everyone's behaviors changed as more and more people were added to our small tent city. At first everyone got along and helped each other doing their individual job tasks. As we reached a critical mass of people living in cramped quarters, 12 per tent, everyone's behavior changed. We weren't nearly so cordial to each other. Our relationships became tense and strained. People stopped helping one another and it was each person out for themselves. Luckily, our commander recognized what was happening and started a "kill them with kindness" campaign. He started out by always saying please and thank you and being overtly polite. His actions caught on with the officers and we all started to go over the top in being nice to each other. Pretty soon that attitude spread throughout the entire tent city and people once again began looking out for each other and acting like one big family.

I think that's exactly what Jesus means for us to do when he commands us to love one another as he loved us. May we be a people who can set the example for the greater community by going overboard on showing love and politeness to each other. May our actions of agape, self-giving love let others know we belong to Jesus Christ. May we remember, and never forget, Jesus is still with us now and forever and nothing can separate us from His love. Most importantly, may our love for one another bring honor and glory to God our Father. Amen.