

Easter 6 Sermon
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Over and over again in the scriptures we are reassured of Christ's unconditional love for us. It's a love that is so strong that nothing can break its bonds. We are loved by Christ with a love so strong that death was conquered through him for our sake, so that not even death can separate us from the love of God. It's a love that we cannot earn, but is freely given regardless.

But the scriptures we have heard today do not focus on Christ's love for **us**. Instead, they focus on our love for Christ, and how we are to show that love in the world. The Gospel reading begins with Christ saying "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." Even though Christ's love for us is unconditional, there is an expectation that if we love Christ, we will respond in some way to the love Christ has shown us. And that response is not supposed to stop at us feeling happy or reassured. Those are fine responses, but they are not enough. If we truly believe we are loved by Christ, and if we love Christ, in turn, we are asked to respond by obeying the commandments that Christ has given to us.

Though Christ loved them, he expected a lot of his followers. Christ expected the rich young man to sell all he had and follow him. Christ expected a potential disciple to follow him immediately, even though this man had a recently deceased father. Christ expected the 12 apostles to drop everything they were doing, leave everything they had, and follow him. Though Christ loved all of these people regardless, and was willing to meet them where they were in their lives, there were some things he was not willing to let slide.

This same idea is shown in Paul's teaching in the Acts reading we heard today. Paul hoped to teach of Christ's redeeming love to the people of Athens, and was willing to meet them where they were in their faith lives, but only to a point. When Paul first entered Athens, he was distressed to see that the city was full of idols, human-made figures that being worshipped as gods. But Paul looked at these idols and found an altar dedicated "to an unknown god." Paul then went to the Areopagus, a place where many intellectual conversations and debates took place, and he told the Athenians that, as they were deeply religious, Paul would make known to them this unknown god that they had been worshipping.

Paul then tells them of "the God who made the world and everything in it" and tells the Athenians of all the things that God has done for the world because of God's abundant love. In this we see that Paul was willing to meet the Athenians where they were: he spoke of altars and worship practices that were familiar to them in order to connect the people to his teachings about God. He wanted to share with the Athenians the assurance of Christ's love that has been given to all through Christ's being raised from the dead.

However, he was not willing to accept the Athenians' wrong behaviors and beliefs. Paul cared about the Athenians and cared about God enough that he wanted to make God's commandments known to them. After teaching them about all of the loving things that God has done for us, Paul told the Athenians "Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals" and he urged the Athenians to repent. Paul did not tell them they could continue with their familiar system of worship. He expected that their newfound knowledge of God's love should change their behavior in a positive way and that they should no longer worship idols. He expected that if they were to accept Christ they would also accept Judeo-Christian traditions, such as the traditional teaching that God is so vast that any attempt to create an idol to worship instead of God was not right.

Yet, though in many places where Paul spoke in Acts he converted many believers, he does not seem to convert many Athenians. Earlier in the chapter from which we heard today, Paul debates with local Jews and philosophers, who dismiss his talk of the love demonstrated by the risen Christ and call Paul, a peddler of old ideas that are no longer relevant. The Athenians were looking for the next big thing, the next new fad they could jump on. In fact, the only reason Paul gets invited to talk at the

Areopagus in the first place is that some people wanted to know about this “new teaching” that Paul was proclaiming.

But even though some of Paul’s ideas were new, they were not cutting edge enough for the Athenians, most of whom thought Paul’s ideas were stale and boring. They wanted something different. They were not interested in the tradition passed on to those Christians from the Jews. They were not willing to follow the code of conduct that Paul was teaching them. They were not willing to accept God’s love, nor love God enough to follow God’s commandments.

Many Christians today can often fall into the same line of thinking as the Athenians. We may be willing to learn about Christ, to be loved by Christ and to love Christ, as long as we’re not challenged to change how we live our lives or to rethink our beliefs. We may be willing to listen to teachings about Christ that are new and innovative, but immediately reject the traditional as being out of date and irrelevant. However, it’s important for Christians especially to understand that traditional does not mean wrong, it does not mean misguided, it does not mean uninformed, and it does not mean bigoted. It’s true some things claimed by some Christians as “traditional” fall into one or many of those categories. We know that the word “traditional” is thrown around by certain Christians when trying to justify their hatred towards certain groups. Yet more often than not these misguided ideas described as “traditional” are not traditional at all, but are rather a misuse and misinterpretation of the scriptures.

But more often than not I think many modern Christians tend to reject the traditional because beliefs traditionally held by Christians- the virgin birth, the miracles Jesus performed, the resurrection- cannot be scientifically proven. We may be willing to accept that God loves us and we’re willing to love God, yet we are not willing to accept the miraculous. We think that if something cannot be scientifically proven, then it is not true.

Yet the idea that something is not true unless it can be scientifically proven is not some sort of cosmic law. It is a value judgment, not an inherent truth of life. To accept that things are only true if they have the data to back them up is to accept that something is only important, acceptable, and trustworthy if it can be measured scientifically. But to accept that is to also accept that things like joy and sorrow, hope and despair, love and loss, are only significant if they create a scientifically observable difference in the health and survival of a human—they would have no significance outside of the measurable. It means putting one’s trust in the experiments and empirical observations of others and accepting those things as true.

Yet in the Gospel reading last Sunday Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” To accept that is to accept that there are things of value in this world that are not scientifically measurable, to accept the fear that comes along with not having data to back up our beliefs, to accept that the factual is not ultimately what we should put our trust in. To have this kind of faith is to put our ultimate trust, not in things that have been scientifically measured, but in things passed down to us in scripture and through the church. It means accepting Christ’s love for us and loving Christ enough to put our ultimate trust in him and what he has taught and commanded us. It means meeting people where they are at, as Jesus and Paul did, without accepting all behaviors and beliefs as correct, showing through our own witness and actions and through our love that Christ is the Truth.

That does not mean we have to beat people over the head with our faith. That does not mean that we would have to accept all scripture as literally true or view the church as infallible, but it would mean we’d have to take seriously the things we learn in scripture and from the traditions of the church, carefully examining all we have been told without immediately rejecting those things that we are uncomfortable with. It means seeking the Truth. It means loving the Truth. It means keeping the commandments of the Truth. And it means doing all of these things with the knowledge that throughout this struggle to seek, love, and follow the Truth, that God’s love for us is neverfailing. Amen.