

Tracy Daub
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Acts 11:1-18; **John 13:31-35**

THE HARDEST THING

The Easter season is a joyous time where we celebrate the Resurrection and God's love for us. And who doesn't like *love*? Love is a good thing. But the underlying truth we don't often want to acknowledge is that Resurrection love is really, really hard. And we don't usually like hard things. In fact, we do our best to avoid hard things and to get out of doing unpleasant things. Watch how teenagers will scatter when the meal is over and it's time to wash the dishes. When working with committees and there comes a time when someone is needed to take on a job no one really wants to do, watch how all the committee members eyes will start boring holes in the table--no one daring to look up for fear they will be nabbed for the job.

I've had this experience when exercising on a treadmill, when the physical exertion becomes really hard and my mind starts screaming, "Quit! Quit!" There have been times when I have given in to those voices, hit the stop button and brought the treadmill to a stop, mercifully ending what was hard. I remember when I was giving birth to our second child, and the pain and exertion of labor became very intense, and I had that same "treadmill" feeling of reaching one's threshold and wanting to quit, and then having the panicky feeling of realizing, "Oh no! I can't quit! I can't get off this treadmill and say: let's do this some other day!" There was only one way to deal with that hardness and that was by going through it.

There are many hard things we face in life, and among those hard things is love. Resurrection love is hard. Resurrection love is full of challenges and things that aren't always pleasant. Resurrection love will not always feel like a greeting card moment. And it is important we understand this if we plan to follow the Jesus of love.

We know that Jesus taught us to love. We hear that message again in our reading today from John's gospel. Jesus is with his disciples shortly before his arrest and crucifixion. Of course, the disciples don't yet know that Jesus is about to die. And in this farewell discourse, Jesus talks to the disciples about love. "I give you a new commandment," he tells them, "that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

Jesus is not speaking about a warm, sentimental love, the kind of love we have for our children, our pets, our dearest friends. That kind of sentiment is indeed a wonderful aspect of love. But it is not essential for the kind of love Jesus speaks about. A clue we have about the kind of love Jesus means is found in his words: "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." Jesus serves as the model for the kind of love he commands. So if we go back into Jesus' life we see him forgiving people, we see him standing up for others, we see him including outsiders, we see him caring about people's bodies and their spirits, we see him feeding the hungry, we see him remaining steadfast even to those who would betray him, deny him, abandon him. That is how Jesus loved.

Now, I would imagine that all this talk about love seemed pretty abstract to the disciples. I imagine that maybe it was only after Jesus' crucifixion and then his resurrection that the disciples would begin to see the concrete form Jesus' love for them and others would take. And then, then later when they had to try to follow the way of Jesus in loving others, then they would begin to understand the way resurrection love moved from an abstract idea to something concrete and real. And then they would understand just how hard resurrection love can be.

Resurrection love moves from an abstract idea to something concrete in the story we have from the Book of Acts. The Book of Acts is the account of the earliest days of the followers of Jesus in the aftermath of the Resurrection. It tells the story of the emerging Christian community

striving to understand what it means to follow Jesus on the way of love. And today's story presents the earliest followers of Jesus with an enormous challenge. Could Gentiles, non-Jewish people, could such people as Gentiles also be included in God's circle of love and salvation?

In our story, Peter, Jesus' chief disciple, tells other Jewish followers of Jesus about this astonishing experience he had. It began with a rather horrifying dream he had where he saw a vision of all kinds of unclean animals and then heard God command him to eat these animals. Faithful Jewish people followed very clear rules about what kinds of foods they could and could not eat. Certain foods were considered unclean and could never be eaten. In a similar way, certain kinds of people--including Gentiles, who were not Jewish--were considered unclean. A faithful Jewish person would not touch a Gentile, would not stay in a Gentile home, and definitely would not eat with a Gentile. But Peter first has this vision where he is told by God to eat this unclean food. And Peter, imagining he knows better than God, tells God, "No way, God, for I have never eaten such filth in my life!" But God says, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." This back and forth between Peter and God happens three times. Then the vision ends. And immediately, Peter is summoned by three men to go to the Gentile home of a Roman centurion named Cornelius. Normally, Peter would never dream of entering a Gentile home. It would be unclean. It would be off-limits. But Peter begins to understand what the vision of unclean foods might have been signaling. We have to imagine that Peter thought to himself, "O no, Lord! Not them! Don't make me go there!" But that is what Resurrection love compels of him. And so Peter goes to the home of this Gentile man, and there he preaches about Jesus. And he eats with Cornelius, and stays with Cornelius. And Cornelius and his whole household become believers.

Resurrection love demanded something incredibly hard of Peter, demanded that he overcome deeply ingrained social and religious teachings, demanded that he include these outsiders into the saving message of God's love. And when Peter comes back to Jerusalem, the Jewish followers of Jesus call him on the carpet for his behavior of eating and associating with Gentiles. So Peter tells them this story. And they are astonished by it. And they too must confront the hard and challenging demands of Resurrection love.

Resurrection love makes hard demands on all of us. We all have a "not them!" or a "not that" in our own lives--people we don't want to love, people we can't forgive, circumstances where following Jesus will require great effort from us, exact sacrifices of our time, our money, our energies. O Lord, we say, *not that, not them!* But every day we rise from our beds, Resurrection love moves from an abstract idea to a hard reality--the real situations in our real lives where we are summoned to live out the new and resurrected life and love of Jesus: to love one another just as Jesus has loved us. And that, that is a tall order.

I wish I could stand here and say that following Jesus is easy. But he is the one who told us that all who want to be his disciple must pick up our own crosses and follow him into the struggle to love. To walk with Jesus in the way of love is hard. Jesus not only tells us to love, he *commands* us to love. And that means that we have no choice. If we are going to follow this man, we are to commit to his way of love. There is no stop button we can push when things get hard and we want to get off. This is his way: loving our enemies, including the outcasts, forgiving people, working for justice, sharing our resources.

But here's the astonishing bit of good news. God has confidence that we can do it! As hard as it is, God has confidence that you and I can do this thing called love. And I believe that God knows that as we love with Resurrection love, we ourselves will be raised to new life.