**May 10, 2015 – 6th Sunday in Easter**

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*“I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.”*

Today it seems as if joy is sort of thin on the ground. Internationally, the Middle East is blowing up from so many directions that it’s hard to sort out who’s shooting at whom, and millions of refugees are running out of places to run to. Whole countries are going bankrupt in Europe. And Russia seems like it wants to put together another Soviet Union.

Closer to home, cities like Baltimore and Ferguson are exploding into riots, because it seems like young black boys are being killed by police in record numbers. And in the private sector the shootings just never seem to stop and our lawmakers either can’t or don’t want to figure out how to stop them. And in the meantime, the gap between the richest and the poorest keeps on growing with the result that nearly sixteen million children are living in food insecure households, or in other words, starving.

And even closer to home, in our own backyards, on South Dakota’s reservations, people freeze to death every winter and teenagers are killing themselves in record numbers because they have no hope for their futures.

Not a lot of room for joy, it seems.

But look at what Jesus and his disciples were facing. Internationally Rome has taken over most of the known world and imposed its Pax Romana wherever it went. In other words, it has conquered and enslaved those who were lucky enough not to have been killed during the conquering process. The people are under the thumbs not only of the Romans and their corrupt tax collectors, but also of the puppet kings they have put in place and of the Jewish religious authorities.

And closer to home, Jesus has angered both the Romans and the Pharisees and Saducees, and he knew that this was his last night on earth. His betrayer, Judas, had already left to give him over to the authorities, and he has very little time to tell his remaining disciples what will happen and what they need to do.

And what does he tell them? That their joy will be complete.

But it’s the how that matters – to Jesus, to his disciples, and to us. And that how comes in one simple word – *agape*. Love.

* *As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you;*
* *Abide in my love.*
* *If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.*
* *This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.*
* *No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.*
* *I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.*

There’s a progression here. The Father loves Jesus, Jesus loves us, and we abide in that love. There’s that word abide again – we have a home in Jesus’ love for us. And we abide in that love if we keep Jesus’ commandments just as he has kept the Father’s commandments and live in HIS love.

And here’s the commandment – love one another as Jesus loves us and as God loves Jesus and through him, us. And the greatest love is to lay down your life for your friends. And just in case we haven’t gotten it yet, Jesus tells us that he’s giving us these commands so we might love one another. Period. End of passage.

Jesus is pretty clear here. He commands us to love one another. But in the middle of this passage he says something else. He tells them, “I do not call you servants any longer.”

The NRSV always seems to shy away from the real meaning of the word “*doulos*.” There’s a perfectly good word for servant in Greek – “*diakonia*,” from which we get our word “deacon.” *Doulos* means slave. That word carries a lot of freight for us in this country, mainly because of the Civil War, but it REALLY had meaning to first century Jewish Palestinians. Not only were they, to all intents and purposes, slaves of the Roman Empire, but the Jewish people had been conquered and enslaved many times in their history – starting with their Egyptian captivity.

So for Jesus to say they weren’t slaves any more was huge. And he goes on to say that not only are they not his slaves, they are his friends and privy to all that he knows and all that his Father has given him.

If they love one another. If they lay down their lives for each other.

I know I have said this many times before, and I will no doubt say it many times more before I put away my preaching shoes for the last time. Agape isn’t an emotion. Agape is an action. It’s something we do, not something we feel. It’s not the way Joni Mitchell describes it in her song, *Both Sides Now*:

*Moons and Junes and Ferris wheels,*

*The dizzy dancing way that you feel*

*As every fairy tale comes real.*

Agape is work. Sometimes it’s hard work. Jesus is calling us to love one another not just when we’re loveable, but when we’re not. He calls us to love each other when we’re mean and vindictive to each other. When we’re selfish and racist and bullies. When we’re downright enemies of each other. Still, Jesus calls us to love.

Notice, I didn’t say we have to love OTHERS when THEY’RE all those things. We’re all human. We all have the capacity for great hatred as well as great love. And this is where joy comes in. Remember joy – the thing it seems so hard to come by these days?

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Joy is the result of love – God’s love, agape love.

Not in some quid pro quo way, though. We don’t get a helping of joy every time we truly love, like a doggie biscuit for doing a trick. Rather, loving our neighbor as ourselves, and laying down our lives for one another, opens up our capacity for joy.

And once again, like love, joy isn’t just a feeling. Joy is knowing and sharing God’s love without barriers. It’s pure communion with God. That’s why Jesus could be joyful on the eve of his death. His relationship with his Father was completely open, and his love for us was perfect.

This is what Jesus offers us, and the path he shows us to get there. Live in God’s unending love, and actively spread that love around, and your relationship with God will be complete and perfect.

Sounds easy, huh? Not!

There’s that pesky humanity thing plaguing each of us every day of our lives. We get frustrated and angry, sad and discouraged, petty and mean. Day in and day out, no matter how we try to control ourselves. And if the news is anything to go by, we’re not alone.

Well, it may seem impossible, but one remedy is right in front of us. Actually, two remedies in one. Holy Communion – the communion of saints, and Holy Eucharist – Greek for thanksgiving. Two names for the same thing.

Each week, we come together as a community to thank God for both our blessings and for our problems. The Great Thanksgiving is one big prayer of praise and thanksgiving and supplication all rolled in one. It’s our way of tapping into that great love and the joy that comes with it. It’s our way of acknowledging Jesus’ perfect love for us in his death, and God’s perfect love for us in his resurrection.

That’s why this sacrament – this wonderful gift – is so important. It’s more than a memorial – it’s a booster shot. It gives us the power and the grace to forge ahead and love each other, however imperfectly and messily. It’s God’s gift to all of us who are in communion with God, whether we’re at this rail today or not, and it’s our gift back to God of our very lives.

But it’s not a magic cookie. Holy Communion helps us to go into the world in peace to love and serve the Lord, but we have to actually do the work. We have to choose. Let’s choose love and joy today.

Amen.