

Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year C

The Rev. Ian Burch

St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI

May 15, 2022

Acts 11:1-18 | Revelation 21:1-6 | John 13:31-35 | Psalm 148

There are those who are stoic when they are uncomfortable. Stiff upper lip. Push through the pain and all that. That is not now nor has ever been me. I like to really dig into a nice complaint, and I really respect a well-phrased whine. I like it when people rail against fate or God or circumstances. I find the art of complaining to be a relief to suffering.

But sometimes, complaining really isn't enough. Sometimes you need real help. I lived alone for a number of years, and there are wonderful things about living alone—never having to watch a movie you don't like, knowing that everything is right where you left it, sleeping diagonally on the bed. But one of the big bummers of being alone is when you get sick.

I remember once catching a really nasty bug many years ago. I will spare you the details, but just imagine chills, aches, and everything unmentionable that comes with having a really nasty virus. For the first 24 hours, I was under the covers slipping in and out of insane dreams and only able to have about one sip of water every hour or so. Once it became clear that this bug was not going anywhere, I actually started to get a little scared. I had no family nearby. I had no roommate. I had no one from work who I felt close enough to ask for help. So, in addition to feeling as sick as I ever had in my adult life, I also felt alone and a little bit scared.

In my delirium, I started to think that if I didn't get real fluids in my system, I was going to be in a little bit of trouble. And so, I called an acquaintance who I know lived in the neighborhood. I mean, I think I had met him maybe twice through another friend. And, even though I was super sick, I still found it really uncomfortable to call him and to ask for help. I didn't like to show that kind of vulnerability. And I certainly did not like the idea of a near stranger coming into my apartment that was filled with Kleenex and all the detritus that comes with an invalid.

But, at that point, I was sort of desperate. And so, in a few hours, Matthew came over with Pedialyte and saltines and bananas for me. I remember barely being able to get to the front door and let him in and then immediately needing to retreat back to the bed that had been my home for three days at that point.

And he sat with me, chatted a bit, put the Pedialyte in the fridge and assured me that I could call him for anything else that I needed.

I'm really not quite sure what I would have done if he hadn't come to help me. I have never been sicker before or since.

And so, strangely, when Jesus talks about love, I don't really conjure images of hearts or evenings out on the town with a lover. I instead think about the time someone I didn't know very well brought me Pedialyte.

It's not a coincidence that this is the same gospel passage that we read on Maundy Thursday when Christians around the world wash each other's feet. The kind of love that Jesus talks about is not at all frilly. It deals in hardship, sacrifice, and gross stuff like feet and sickness. The kind of love that Jesus preaches breaks open those places where ego and artifice keep us from one another. In fact, I would say that, if I am going to commit to a life of Christian love to someone, it doesn't even really matter if I like them very much. What matters is that I acknowledge that they are created in the image of almighty god every bit as much as I am. That they have hopes and dreams and fears just like I do. That they are looking to care for family and friends the same way that I do. And that they are mortal and fallible the same way that I am. The kind of love that Jesus preaches concerns itself with care for the other, no matter how sticky or stinky.

In that way, church is sort of like a dress rehearsal. We can say peace to one another, even when we don't really know or maybe even like one another. And we can say prayers for people we have never met or who live halfway around the world. We can fall in love with stories of heroes and villains in the scriptures to practice how we ought to act with the heroes and villains in real life. This space is a laboratory for love, one where we are formed into little Christs so that we can try to follow our Jesus out in the real world.

Jesus says, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

So, people of God, love one another lavishly. Love the poor even when it is inconvenient. Love your political opponents even when you think they are dead wrong. Love your neighbors even when you can barely remember their names. Love people who are different than you, who are strangers to you, who make you uncomfortable. Wash feet. Bring Pedialyte. Let your hands and feet be the hands and feet of Jesus, and let the love of God be the fuel that you need to run the race of life. Let the world know that you are disciples of Jesus because of the love you show to one another. Amen.