

Easter6 B John 15: 9-17

The humorist Will Rogers told us that he never met a man he didn't like. In the musical that celebrated Rogers' life, there is a song by that title and in that song Rogers admits that one man "put him to the test," but never pushed him finally to the point where his ability to like evaporated.

I don't know what your response is to Rogers' disclosure, but I am led to think he was -- to utilize an overworked phrase -- "in denial." Come now, can any of us stand and say that we have, without exception, always liked every single person with whom we have ever come into contact?

I appreciated the honesty of a well-seasoned cleric who confessed: "There are some people to whom I couldn't warm too even if I were cremated with them!"

Christian men and women are not called to like everyone. The old camp song is titled "They Will Know We Are Christians By Our Love," and not, "They Will Know We Are Christians By Our Likes and Dislikes." If there are folks to whom you do not warm up to, know please that you are not in violation of any Christian norm.

We are not called to like, but we are called -- and this is the burden of our text -- to love: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you," says Jesus.

Love, as it is defined by our faith, is both a revered panacea, and an underemployed practice. To say that the answer to the world's problems is for people to love each other more is both right and banal at the same time.

It sounds wonderful and grand. Who would argue with the contention? But when you sit eyeball to eyeball with another person -- especially one who is cantankerous, obnoxious, difficult, unlovely, and seemingly unlovable -- it is anything but an easy task.

If you study the life and words and parables and sermons and actions of Jesus, you will find an eternity's worth of things you should do. But there was precisely just one thing which was so vital that Jesus actually went so far as to phrase it as a command, and that was to love each other.

We are to love one another, cherish one another, even lay down our lives for one another if need be, and it is all an extension of being a branch on Jesus the true vine. Apparently Jesus knew that if we could do just this one commandment, everything else would follow.

If you bring a child to an ice cream parlor, you won't need to start issuing rules which insist that the child order a cone, eat it, enjoy it, find it delicious, and so just generally have fun! Once the child gets to the parlor, the rest follows. So also with love: if we can't do this, nothing else will work, either. If we can, the rest follows.

Our faith is not something we talk about. The weather, sports and politics dominate our conversations, while matters of faith rarely appear at all. Yet, Jesus said we are to be bearers of fruit. Each of you is a branch. You who are connected to the one true vine, represent the church wherever you go. And when you are faithful it is contagious.

People in our area, I believe are noticing that we are an alive group of people. They noticed when the bushes were pruned, the parking lot was full or that remodeling was taking place. Just as the church is a visible presence of God's abiding love, each of you is a visible presence in the community.

I share with you A poem by Leigh Hunt (1784-1859) who describes a man by the name of Abou Ben Adhem who had a dream. He awakened in the night, and there in his room was an angel of the Lord writing in a golden book.

He said to the angel: "What writest thou?" The angel answered: "...The names of those who love the Lord." "And is mine one?" said Abou. "Nay, not so," Replied the angel. Abou spoke more low, But cheerily still, and said, "I pray thee, then, Write me as one that loves his fellow men."

The angel wrote and vanished. The next night the angel appeared again but this time with a great wakening light, And showed the names of those who love God; And, lo! Ben Adhem's name led all the rest! When Adhem saw his name at the top of the list of those who love the Lord, he asked the angel what had happened.

The angel said, "If we love not our brothers and sisters whom we have seen, how can we say we love God whom we have not seen?"

Author and speaker Brennan Manning came up with a slogan. The slogan is, "I am the one Jesus loves." It sounds a little arrogant doesn't it? But he is actually quoting Scripture. Jesus' closest friend on earth, the disciple named John, is identified in the Gospels as "the one Jesus loved."

Manning said, "If John were to be asked, 'What is your primary identity in life?' he would not reply, 'I am a disciple, an apostle, an evangelist, an author of one of the four Gospels,' but rather, 'I am the one Jesus loves.'"

What would it mean, I ask myself, if I too came to the place where I saw my primary identity in life as "the one Jesus loves"? How differently would I view myself at the end of a day?

Sociologists have a theory of the looking-glass self: you become what the most important person in your life (wife, father, boss, etc.) thinks you are. How would my life change if I truly believed the Bible's astounding words about God's love for me, if I looked in the mirror and saw what God sees?

Brennan Manning tells the story of an Irish priest who, on a walking tour of a rural parish, sees an old peasant kneeling by the side of the road, praying. Impressed, the priest says to the man, "You must be very close to God." The peasant looks up from his prayers, thinks a moment, and then smiles, "Yes, he's very fond of me." Amen