

The Lutheran Church of the Atonement
Florissant, Missouri
The Fifth Sunday of Easter -- Year C
May 14-15, 2022
Acts 11:1-18; Revelation 21:1-6
St. John 13:31-35

It was dumb; it was very dumb. Back when I was still a seminary field worker at Resurrection Lutheran in Sappington, I took part in a series of congregation-wide forums, addressing a number of issues confronting the church. One of those concerns, expressed by a number of members, was the growing number of people who were walking out of worship services prior to the celebration of Holy Communion. After several folks had spoken to this concern, I stood up and observed, out loud, that the only person who walked out before the first Lord's Supper was Judas. That was dumb; it was tactless, and it was dumb.

Not one of the commentaries and sermon studies that I looked at in preparation for this weekend's sermon made any connection between the departure of the betrayer in this week's Gospel reading and Jesus's teaching of the New Commandment. It's like, Judas left, so let's get on with something else. But, maybe John was trying to make a connection. As John tells the story, Judas walking out is the very antithesis of the kind of community to which Jesus calls us. We can walk out, when things don't go our way, or we can stay and work through whatever hardships, disappointments, and issues there may be -- in order to love, just as Jesus has first loved us.

For years, scholars have debated what Judas's expectations might have been, as he decided to become a disciple of Jesus and then traveled with Jesus for three years. Perhaps, Judas expected Jesus to lead a revolt against Rome or materially to improve the lot of the poor or to reconcile differences between the various factions within Judaism or to restore some integrity to the practices of the Temple or to establish a very different kind of Kingdom than the Kingdom Jesus had in mind. Whatever expectations brought Judas to invest three years of his

life in following Jesus, by that Thursday evening of Holy Week, it was clear: they weren't going to be met. And, Judas walked out!

Put that way, Judas's behavior becomes a bit more understandable. For we all live lives of reciprocity and expectation. We are willing to invest ourselves, our time, and our resources into a given situation in the expectation of reciprocity -- that, in the end, the return on our investment will have made it all worthwhile:

-- so, we work hard at a low-salaried position in the expectation that, when there are openings for advancement, we'll be at the front of the line;

-- so, we encourage our spouse to get that advanced degree in the expectation that it will lead to more time and resources for family activities together;

-- so, we practice diligently as a reserve on the basketball team in the expectation that the next available spot in the starting lineup will be ours.

We live lives of reciprocity and expectation. And, when our expectations are not met, our first inclination -- and maybe our final inclination -- is to walk out, muttering, as we go, "After all I did...." So, people walk out on jobs, walk out on marriages, walk out on friendships, walk out on teams, walk out on professional associations, walk out on community groups, walk out on the very relationships that matter most!

The Law of Reciprocity, of "quid pro quo," of tit-for-tat, is a very hard law, a very cruel taskmaster. It sets up the expectation that we are to be treated equitably, the expectation that, in the end, things will all "even out" -- that the screaming line drive that's caught by the left fielder for an out will be offset by the checked-swing slow-roller that stays fair for a hit -- an expectation that is only rarely ever met!

For years, Bible readers have wondered, "What's so new about this 'new' Commandment, this new law of Jesus -- that we love one another, as He has loved us?" Well, it's new, because -- this is going to 'blow you away' -- it's new, because it's not old. It's new, because it replaces the old. You see, the old standard for all of our relationships was the Law of Reciprocity and Expectation, the old standard of "quid pro quo:" as you give, so should you expect to receive! That's the old standard, to love others, insofar as they have loved you, to do for others, insofar as they have done for you. That's how the whole world conducts business; that's how the whole world builds relationships, "quid pro quo," tit-for-tat. And, when those expectations fail to be met, we know what to do -- we walk out -- just like Judas!

What's new about Jesus's New Commandment is not just that it sets a new standard, but that it sets out to build a whole new kind of community, a community where no-one has earned the right, if you will, to walk out, a community of those who keep on loving and loving and loving some more, because the new standard is "as Jesus loved us," a measurable standard, set by Jesus's own ministry, suffering, death, and Resurrection, a new standard set by Jesus's not walking out, when everyone else had fallen asleep, betrayed, abandoned, and walked out on Him!

As Bishop Lesslie Newbigin once famously remarked, "Jesus didn't leave behind a book or a building; he left a community!" We are that community!

(Please let me hasten to add that in a fallen world -- in a world of abuse and deceit and dishonesty, in a world where "quid pro quo" would sometimes be an improvement -- there are times, when for our own safety and security [or that of our children] we may have no alternative but to walk out. But, that only makes it more important that there be the kind of community that Jesus strives to create, the kind of community to which we

can turn in times of need, a community where we can love and be loved, even as Jesus first loves us.)

In its own roundabout way, John's short Gospel reading today suggests that, when people find a community where we do not walk out on each other, they'll find Jesus,...that, when people find a community where we love each other as Jesus has loved us, they'll find Jesus,...that when people find a community where we rally around each other and support and encourage each other, they'll find Jesus,...that when they find a community that celebrates His love in Bread and Wine, they'll find Jesus.

So, who wants to stay for Communion?

Amen