

Readings: John 13:31-35; Acts 11:1-18

And Jesus said, "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

I read that the mission of Rotary is to provide service to others, promote integrity, and advance world understanding, goodwill, and peace through the fellowship of business, professional, and community leaders.

And your theme, Serve to Change Lives, is very much in keeping with Jesus' command to love. So, thank you Riccarton Rotary for all you do to care for our community.

The story is told about how John the Evangelist, author of the Gospel of John, who was sometimes called the Apostle of Love, was preaching at Ephesus into his nineties.

At that age, John was so feeble that he had to be carried into church on a stretcher. Then, when he could no longer preach a normal sermon, he would lean up on one elbow, and the only thing he would say was, "Little children, love one another." Once he had given this one-line sermon, people would carry him back out of the church on his stretcher.

This continued for weeks, and every week he repeated his one sentence sermon, "Little children, love one another."

Weary of the repetition, the congregation finally asked him, "Master, why do you always say this?"

"Because" John replied, "it is the Lord's command and, if this only is done, it is enough."

I've been thinking hard about this story. The idea of preaching from my bed really appeals to me. I could be carried in and give a pithy one liner and then go back to bed. I'll raise the idea with the Vestry. In the meantime, the message remains, "Little children, love one another."

If ever there is a time when love seems to be in short supply, it's when nations go to war. We have been watching on in horror as Russia invades Ukraine. The cruel human misery from that war is reported nightly but there are also the forgotten wars - in Yemen, the Sudan and Syria. Amongst the suffering and cruelty, we know many stories of kindness and heroism, sacrifice and bravery. It would be great to think, as they did in 1918, that WWI was the war to end all wars, or maybe even WW II was that war, but, of course, fighting and cruelty continue.

The importance of the first reading today from Acts can't be overestimated. The biggest struggle the first Christians had was, "Is God's love seen in Jesus Christ just for the Jews or is it for everyone?" And linked to it, "Do people need to become Jews to share in God's promise?" Peter had a vision that turned his understanding right around. God's

love, he discovered, is for everyone. Without that vision we wouldn't be sitting here today. In the meantime, John is at pains to give us Jesus words: "Love one another, just as I have loved you. By this everyone will know you are my disciples if you have love for one another."

The biggest disease today, Mother Teresa once said, is more spiritual than physical. It's not leprosy or tuberculosis, (and we could add Covid), she observed, but rather the feeling of being unwanted, uncared for, and deserted by everyone. The greatest evil is lack of love and compassion – the terrible indifference towards one's neighbour who lives at the roadside, assaulted by exploitation, corruption, poverty, and disease."

It is this lack of love that is a darkness that leads to death. We might be physically alive but quietly dying inside. A life without love is not really a life worth living. Because we are created in the image of God, we need one another.

With love we can face all sorts of hardships. The real killer of community is the consumer mentality: "I'm in it for what I can get out of it." Rather, we need to ask, "How can I use my community as a vehicle to care for others?" I think you at Rotary get that.

"Little children love one another"

In our world love can be as simple as wearing a mask, or as complicated as working for peace.

Many of you will be familiar with Leonardo da Vinci's painting The Last Supper. Some of you may have been lucky enough to have seen it. Before Leonardo could paint the 13 figures, he needed to find men who could serve as models. Each model had to have a face that expressed da Vinci's vision of that disciple. Needless to say, it was a tedious task finding just the right face.

One Sunday da Vinci was in church for worship, and he saw a man in the choir who looked just like his image of Jesus. It wouldn't be hard to imagine that happening with our choir. The man Leonardo saw had features of compassion and wisdom. Arrangements were made and the man agreed to sit as the model of our Lord.

Years went by and the painting was still not complete. Da Vinci had a problem. He couldn't find just the right face for Judas. He was looking for someone whose face was streaked with despair, confusion, and sin. Ten years after starting the painting, he found just such a man in prison. This man's face had all the qualities of Judas.

Leonardo worked feverishly for many days, but as the work went on, he noticed a certain change taking place in the prisoner. His face seemed filled with tension and his bloodshot eyes were filled with horror as he gaped at himself on the canvas. One day Leonardo sensed the man's uneasiness so greatly that he stopped and asked, "What is it that troubles you so much?"

The man buried his face in his hands and convulsed with sobs, "Don't you remember me? I was your model for Jesus." He began to tell his story. The man had turned his back on Christ and turned his life over to hate. He no longer loved. Where there had once been love now there was misery and greed. Where there once was hope, now there was despair. Where there was once light now there was darkness.

You see, to love is a choice, it is an attitude.

"Little children, love one another."

Prayers

Tonight, in prayers we pray for Rotary especially for the goal of serving the community. Grant them imagination and perseverance to show love in practical ways, to promote worthy causes and to extend the hand of friendship across society and the world. Practically at this time we ask your blessing on the project of supporting Tonga in its rebuild after cyclones and COVID.

We thank you for all who are willing to serve as office bearers in Rotary especially bless the work of Ross Beaumont the President.

We pray this night for all people of goodwill throughout the world that, like Rotary, work for peace, equality and understanding. Draw closer the time, O God, when we don't need organizations, but that people so live your command to love, that all of us live in harmony and peace.

This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen