

Today, we read the very familiar “New Commandment” that Jesus gave to his disciples – “... that you should love one another.” Perhaps we have heard it too many times, so that its familiarity makes it seem like the stain on the carpet that we have seen so often that we no longer notice it. At one level, it’s just a restatement of the second Great Commandment, that “you should love your neighbour as yourself.” But here Jesus puts in a couple of extra twists. “No-one has greater love than this – than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” This has often been seen literally in wartime, where the bond between comrades can be so strong that one will risk, or even give up, his life for another. The other new idea is that Jesus turns the table on his former disciples – servants, he calls them – and says that now they have become his friends. Unlike a friend, he says, a servant does not know (and has no right to know) what the master is doing or thinking.

It made me stop and think again about what it means to be a Christian. The easy answer is that we are ‘disciples’ or ‘followers’ of Jesus Christ. But disciples are ‘students’. In two weeks we will celebrate Pentecost, when the disciples become known as apostles – when the ‘students’ graduated. In my own, personal, context, as a former chemistry teacher, chemistry students carry out laboratory exercises. They are supervised, to make sure they do the exercises properly and safely, and the results are known ahead of time (i.e., they are exercises not experiments). Gradually, the students are given more autonomy, perhaps in an independent research project, but they are still supervised. Graduates, on the other hand, work without hand-holding, on investigations that have not been carried out before, and the results are, to a greater or lesser degree, unknown. Jesus did the same thing. He taught the disciples; later he sent them out into the villages to preach; then they reported the results of those “independent research projects” back to him. They did not become independent investigators until Pentecost.

The apostle Peter had the experience of an unexpected result in the snippet of Scripture we read from *Acts of the Apostles*. He had been summoned by a man called Cornelius to speak to the people of Caesarea. Peter recounted the story of Jesus Christ – his baptism, preaching, death, and resurrection – and said that he and the other apostles had been given instructions to preach in Jesus’ name. In today’s short passage, everyone was amazed that the Holy Spirit was made available to everyone in the crowd. No-one, even Peter, would have expected that the Holy Spirit would fall on both Jews and Gentiles.

Two weeks ago, I listened to Michael Enright interviewing the Israeli author David Grossman on the CBC radio program *The Sunday Edition* while I drove home from church. Grossman is a long time advocate for peace with the Palestinians; his son was killed by the Palestinians twelve years ago, while serving with the Israeli army. The incredible sadness of that loss brought him to realize that no matter what, Israelis and Palestinians alive today, and their descendants yet to come, had no choice but somehow to share the territory we call the Holy Land. He said, and I quote (in abbreviated form!):

“This week [i.e., two weeks ago], Israel is celebrating 70 years [of independence]. I hope we will celebrate many more years and many more generations of children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, who will live here alongside an independent Palestinian state, safely, peacefully and creatively, and – most importantly – in a serene daily routine, in good neighbourliness; and they will feel at home here. Home is a place whose walls – borders – are clear and accepted; whose existence is stable, solid, and relaxed; whose inhabitants know its intimate codes; whose relations with its neighbours have been settled. It projects a sense of the future.

“And we Israelis, even after 70 years ... we are not yet there. We are not yet home. Israel ... may be a fortress, but it is not yet a home. The solution to the great complexity of Israeli-Palestinian relations can be summed up in one short formula: if the Palestinians don’t have a home, the Israelis won’t have a home either. The opposite is also true: if Israel will not be a home, then neither will Palestine.”

Grossman went on to give examples of issues that contribute to the Fortress Israel mentality – Israeli snipers killing Palestinian protestors; the creation of a quasi apartheid system in the occupied territories; the use of questionable laws to expel African asylum seekers; demeaning the Jewishness of Jews who are not Orthodox – ending each of these examples and more with the rhetorical phrase “Israel becomes less of a home.”

As I listened, I realized that what Grossman said about his nation (Israel) could also be applied to us in North America. The shame of Israel’s treatment of the Palestinian people can be mirrored in Canada by our historical treatment of Indigenous First Nations peoples. To the extent that they do not feel that they have a home, so the rest of Canada also has less of a home. The United States has another divide, between the Europeans who arrived voluntarily and the Africans who came to North America as slaves. To the extent that people of African descent do not feel at home in America, so other Americans have less of a home, whether they realize that or not. Likewise, those who rail against immigrants or consider them to be second class citizens make those ‘others’ feel less at home, and thus diminish their own sense of ‘home’. Because, as David Grossman said, “A home is a place whose existence is stable, solid, and relaxed ... and that projects a sense of the future.”

There is a tangible expression of that idea in our family right now. Robin and Alison are planning to leave the house they have come to love, in the neighbourhood and town they like near Chicago. They intend to return to Canada, precisely because they do not feel that their future in the US is secure and stable enough in which to raise William. In the language I have borrowed from David Grossman, they feel that in Oak Park, Illinois they have a house, but not a home.

All this goes back to the passage from John’s Gospel. Jesus said, “I give you a new commandment, that you should love one another.” I think that it’s vitally important to dwell on what that English word “love” means in this context. It isn’t romantic or saccharine sweet. It isn’t even like loving our parents, friends or children. It means giving respect, honour, dignity, and recognition to other people, especially those who are in some way different from ourselves, e.g. Israelis vs Palestinians, Indigenous Canadians vs those of European descent. In the Sermon on the Mount [Matthew 5: 46], Jesus put it this way: “If you love those who love you [i.e., people like yourself], what reward do you have? Even [the reviled] tax collectors do the same.” Jesus told us that we must show love to the person who is “other” than ourselves, but he did not bequeath us a template or lab write-up to tell us how. As friends/graduates rather than disciples/students of Jesus, it is up to us to decide how we must behave.

I once asked a priest who had been ordained as a young man, “How did you know back then what to say to someone who had lost a beloved spouse after many years of marriage?” He answered, “I can only think that the Holy Spirit put the right words in my mouth.” That was Peter’s experience in our reading from *Acts* this morning. It has also been my experience. May it be each of yours, too.