

The Fifth Sunday of Easter - Year C  
May 2, 2010  
The Reverend Amy Hodges Morehous

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## “Operating Instructions”

In the name of God, who loved us into being, in the name of Christ, who sees each one of us, and loves us to the end, and the name of the Holy Spirit, in whom we live, move, love and have our being. Amen

Because that's what we're talking about today. Love. In fancy theological terms, this portion of John's Gospel is called Jesus' 'farewell discourse' – but in plain English, what Jesus is doing is saying 'Good-bye.' Good-byes are always difficult, and Jesus' is especially so. He's trying to prepare his disciples for his betrayal, trial and death, and is left in the unenviable proposition of summing up his instructions to the disciples. This is his, “If you remember nothing else that I've taught you, remember this,” speech. I'm not sure about the Greek, but in English, it takes him 40 words to give us the entire climax of the gospel of John – the only direct commandment in the entire Gospel. “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.”

That sounds terrific, doesn't it? We are called to a life built on love. How hard could that be? We can all love one another, and sit around by the campfire, and project our love out into the universe, and roast marshmallows, and sing 'Kum Ba Ya' into eternity. Right? Isn't that what Jesus means?

Well, no, I don't think that's exactly what he had in mind. I'm sure Jesus would have loved a good roasted marshmallow and a round of Kum Ba Ya with the disciples – he certainly could have used the rest - but he had something entirely different in mind. By love, Jesus doesn't mean for us to just have warm, schmoopy feelings toward every person on the planet. It's difficult enough, sometimes, to have even vague affection for the person sitting in the pew beside us. Love (for a first century Jew) is an act, not an emotion. It's something you do, not something you say. I saw a gentleman at a restaurant just the other day with a T-shirt that I immediately coveted. It read, “Jesus loves you, and I'm really trying.”

Because we are, aren't we? You and I? We're here because we're trying. You come here every week to be in community – to pray together, to kneel at the communion table together, to

be a consolation and a support to each other. Those feelings of warmth and community – those feelings of family, of belonging to God’s family – are important for building up the body of Christ. But, we also are given a warning about being so secure in our own small family, that we don’t make space in it for others. Then those feelings solidify into a high wall that serves to keep others out – “I just love everyone here, and we are all so focused on the same goals, and we all do things in the same way, and we all think exactly alike. I can’t imagine anyone else coming in and disrupting our perfectly ordered, loving family.” That’s the kind of ‘love’ that says, “You’re in, I can love you, but you - you’re too different from me – you’re out.” That kind of love is no love at all, as the passage from Acts makes clear. Love doesn’t build up a barrier between one person and another. Love doesn’t decide that someone else by virtue of their difference is beyond the reach of God’s love and mercy. Love does not exclude on the basis of circumcised or uncircumcised, Jew or Gentile. Love doesn’t exclude because of gender, or the color of someone’s skin, or social or economic status. “Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth! Young men and women alike, old and young together!” No one is too old, too young, too sick or too healthy, too white, too brown, or too black to be outside the bounds of God’s love. No one. There are no illegal people in the kingdom of God. ‘If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who then are we that we could hinder God?’ Who indeed? God’s love prevails over every human division, over every enmity, over every division we can use to keep us from living in communion with one another.

And how personally, how intimately God loves us. Enough to come to live with and among us. We don’t go to God – God comes to us.

...The home of God is among mortals.  
He will dwell with them as their God;  
they will be his peoples,  
and God himself will be with them;  
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.  
Death will be no more;  
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,  
for the first things have passed away.”

We hear this passage at so many funerals, and we know it so well and so lovingly, because, no matter the bizarre imagery of the book of Revelation, and our struggle to understand it, no matter all the talk of seraphim and judgment and destruction – Revelation gives us this

potent image of a God that will come to us after a great calamity, a God that will wipe our tears, and take away all pain. Pain and tears are a universal language. No matter how old you are, where you live, what language you speak – we all speak the language of pain, of suffering and tears.

We have cried as infants because we were hungry, or afraid. We've cried a child's tears, too - when we broke our favorite toy, when our best friend moved away, when we fell and skinned our knee. We are either living through, or we remember the pain of being a young person– the pain of loneliness, of giving up part of ourselves to fit in, the pain and fear of not fitting in at all, the tears of our first real heartbreak, and the pain, fear and loneliness we all have when we leave our home for the first, or the last, time. As we age, we come to know what it is to shed adult tears – tears of loss, of illness, of frustration. Tears of separation and anxiety. The tears we cry when we are unable to shield our own children from life's pain. The tears of grief that we cry when we let someone go. The tears of inadequacy and want. The pain we feel at our own diminishing health, and lost independence.

Even beyond the pain of our own lives, there is the pain of living in this world, and seeing it clearly, just the way it is – the pain of seeing our unkindness to one another, the pain of seeing segregation and division, the pain of watching our neighbors around the world suffer, and the pain we all feel when we feel that we are absolutely powerless to do anything about any of it.

At any age, we understand pain and tears, and we long for a home, the security of a life free from any want, any pain or any suffering. We long for God to come down to us, and do just that – wipe away all tears, and all suffering. In fact, why doesn't God do that right now? Why wait until the end – why envision some vague future that we cannot possibly comprehend? Why wouldn't a good God do it for each of us, even now? Why would a God of love abandon each of us to all the pain and suffering of life?

The answer, of course, is that God does no such thing. God gifted us not only with life, and with the love and sacrifice of his Son, and the sustaining breath of the Spirit, but God also gifted us with each other. Look to your left. Now look to your right. Now close your eyes for just a moment. Think of your family. Your friends. Now think of all the people with whom you work. Or the people at school. Yes – all the people. Even the ones you don't like. Particularly the ones you don't like. Think of the last person who irritated you. The person in the car next to you this morning. The last person who cut you off in traffic. All those people. If you haven't already opened your eyes, go ahead. Now, all those people – every one – those are God's gifts just to you. Those are the gifts God has given each of us

– the gift of the people who are lurching down the same road with us, all of us, the walking wounded in the midst of living out our painful, crazy, joy-filled lives.

We are in the middle of the story, you see – not in the garden of creation at the beginning, not at the city of God in the end. We are in the middle of our journey together, somewhere between the now and the not yet. And all those people you remembered, those are the people who are given to us, to sustain us in our times of darkness along the way. Those are, every last one of them, the people of God. They are here to wipe your tears, and you are here to wipe theirs. It is our gift to receive and to give, this crazy, irrational love, and Jesus does not say it's optional for those who follow him.

Annie Lamott, one of my favorite writers, wrote a journal of the first year of her son's life, a book called *Operating Instructions*. In it, she writes in fiercely funny, honest and angry words about her nearly overwhelming feelings as a mother, as a single parent, as a recovering addict and as a Christian. She feels alone and completely unequipped, but is overcome by her fierce love and devotion to her colic-y son Sam, surprised by moments of joy, and sustained in unexpected ways by her friends and her faith, despite her lack of understanding of how she ever came to ever be a person of faith in the first place.

How did some fabulously cerebral and black-humored cynic like myself come to fall for all that Christian lunacy, to see the cross as an end, but not a beginning, to believe as much as I do in gravity or in the size of space that Jesus paid a debt he didn't owe because we had a debt we couldn't pay? It, my faith, is a great mystery. It has all the people close to me shaking their heads. It has me shaking my head. But I have a photograph on my wall of this ancient crucifix at a church over in Corte Madeira, a tall splintering wooden Christ with his arms blown off in some war, under which someone long ago wrote, "Jesus has no arms but ours to do his work and to show his love," and every time I read that, I always end up thinking that these are the only operating instructions I will ever need.

Christ leaves us with those 40 words, with our very own 'operating instructions'. May those words be to you solace in the midst of pain, balm in the midst of tears, and direction in the midst of confusion.

Christ sends us forth today to love - to be instruments of love in this world – God's world, and ours. We are God's gift to a world that lives in need of love. We are a people created, redeemed, and sustained by that love, and our joy, our operating instructions in this life, is to bring that love into a wounded world, and to open our hearts and our arms to those who cannot even imagine that it exists.

God loved this world into being, God sent his Son to live among us, to love us to the very end, and God sends the Holy Spirit among us, every day, to sustain us in the midst of our daily lives. Love prevails always, even unto the very end.