

For the Highest Purpose

John 15:12-25

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In Jesus' farewell to his disciples, he did not sugarcoat the challenges that remained ahead. To the disappointment to those committed to social justice, he did not exhort the disciples to change the world. On the contrary, the way Jesus described it, the world would arguably remain the biggest obstacle to their work. The world hated Jesus, and the world would hate those who followed him. If the disciples were hoping Jesus would leave a plan for how to overthrow the empire with the kingdom of God, they were mistaken. Jesus provided no guidance for what people to convert or what lands to conquer. Jesus offered no prescription for a theocratic takeover of the political and economic system. No, Jesus' commandment to his disciples is "that you love one another as I have loved you." Now, I know we throw the word "love" around quite easily but I hope we hear this commandment in the way Jesus' disciples heard it. I hope we hear it as the highest purpose for those called out of the world and appointed to bear fruit . . . ordained to do acts of love.

Jesus has been showing them what he meant by love throughout his ministry with them. He called them friends. Not servants. Not just followers, but friends. Not the type of superficial friends that prevail in our culture and popularized on Facebook. But friends more like family, who care for each other and provide for each other. Jesus has been caring for them and looking

out for their well-being. So committed is Jesus to this love, he is willing to confront the world's violence and condemnation with his own life. This is what bearing fruit looks like in the world. Doing acts of love in a world filled with hate and violence.

The world—the dominant society—has seen these acts of love that Jesus has done, and it has refused to believe it, accept it, or return it. The dominant society has seen the fruit that heals, includes, nourishes, and transforms, and yet, it has chosen another path . . . a path that looks after the few at the expense of the many; a path that opposes God's reconciling work in the world; a path that opposes the light that has come into the world; a path that opposes the revelation that gives power to all to become children of God.

So Jesus' final words are not a call to change the world; it is a call to love one another. It may not be possible and is likely futile to try to change a world that has chosen the way of division, oppression, and rejecting God's revelation. But what Jesus' friends can do is love one another. If the disciples can't trust the world to look after them; if they can't rely on the political and economic system to provide for them and the most vulnerable; if they cannot appeal to the dominant majority to see the vulnerable and to do justice, then the ones who do acts of love will look after each other. Loving one another is so unlike the world that it will be seen as a threat. Looking after one another will be so misunderstood that the dominant society will do everything in its power to stop it. The world would resort to its most violent tool of state execution to stop Jesus. But his love for them—his love for us—would not let him give up on us, even if it meant death.

As we observe the season of Lent, once we get past the easy self-denial of a privileged people mired in distraction and abundance, the posture to which we are invited is one of deep introspection. We are given the opportunity to be honest about who we are and what we stand

for. And so, we ask ourselves: what are our values, and have we lived up to them? What should we do that we have not done? What should we have done that we were afraid to do?¹ And if we take seriously Jesus' commandment to love one another as he has loved us, we are invited to contemplate some deeper questions: have we done acts of love? What is a life committed to love worth? Is love worth dying for?

When I contemplate those questions, several people come to mind. Martin Luther King. Jimmie Lee Jackson. And yes, James Reeb, one of those faithful disciples ordained to bear fruit. At the moment when people were concluding that the civil rights movement was dead; that the nonviolent struggle for human rights for African-Americans was stalled; that white people had given enough and were in no mood to give anymore; that Congress had neither the political will or nor the political capital to give Southern blacks the right to vote; and even after the Alabama State Police had violently "charged, trampled, clubbed, and tear-gassed six hundred marchers" on the Edmund Pettus bridge, James Reeb heeded the call to love, to look after the members of his family who were oppressed and dominated.

I don't know if he thought he could change the world, but he did what he could do. He loved his friends enough that he would go to Selma and march with them. The threat of violence hung over the city like a suffocating fog, but it could not smother the call and commitment to love one another. James Reeb went to Selma and the world in the form of angry racists who could not stand the sight of a white man demonstrating his love for his black family, killed him. Yet, the works of love James Reeb did remain a testament to Jesus' declaration that "no one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friend." And while the description used the

¹ Paraphrase of some questions for Lent posed by Amy-Jill Levine in *Entering the Passion of Jesus*, 8-9.

poetic eloquence of the passive voice, I hope it does not mislead us in wrestling with the horror that prevails when hate devours love . . . Hate killed Jesus; hate killed James Reeb.

Nearly three years after his death, Ralph Abernathy, King's faithful and trusted lieutenant and a civil rights hero in his own right, described James Reeb as having died "for the highest purpose for which God called him," who gave with his life the "ultimate testimony to love." He sprang into action, not when the coast was clear or the way forward was easy, but when the world—the dominant society—remained as implacable and unrelenting in its resistance to the cries for justice for African-Americans as ever.

The world is no more inclined to heed Jesus' commandment to love today than it was when he said farewell to his disciples. Far too often, we get more preoccupied with how the world has failed than with how to love one another. And yet, the commandment to love is more relevant than it has ever been. And as we orient ourselves toward God during this season of confession, repentance, and repair, may we heed the commandment to love and commit our very lives to the highest purpose for which God has called us.