

6 Easter – Year B – May 17, 2009
Acts 10:44-48; Psalm 98; 1 John 5:1-6; John 15:9-17
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When I was studying for my undergraduate degree, one chemistry professor took a great deal of pride in his ability to draw a large, almost perfect, freehand circle on the blackboard. If you have ever tried it, it's really difficult. Years earlier, a much more accomplished artist by the name of Vincent van Gogh once said, "I believe that life is round." More recently, a friend of mine who began to paint after she retired became passionate about the shapes of shadow and shading in her paintings. Lis explained enthusiastically that it is the shadows that bring the painting to life, that give it perspective and depth. It is not just the shadows that bring our own lives into perspective, but the patterns of faith that form and shape our hearts as well. If you had to choose a pattern that best describes the shape of your life what would it be? Does it feel like a nice orderly square? What about a cross or a star? Does it look like a triangle or a pyramid? When asked the question did your mind think of a sphere, with hidden layers beneath a smooth surface? Perhaps your life mostly resembles an abstract painting with unexpected flashes of color, shapes and patterns that nonetheless fit together with a pleasing resonance. Or is it more like a random pattern, the kind of bold scribbles drawn with child-like abandon?

Today's letter from John to the church is rather like a diagnostic on our patterns of faithfulness. Jesus is the only one who has lived a life in the perfect circle of faithfulness, love and obedience to God. Within this portion of the letter we again see the Trinity, often depicted pictorially as three overlapping circles. There is Jesus, the Christ, whom in faith believers proclaim as the only Son of God, our savior and redeemer. There is God, God's commandments, God's children and God's call for our obedience. And there is the Holy Spirit, who whispers truth to us, who fills us with life-giving love, and who is a light shining in the hearts of all believers that guides and beckons. Faith, obedience, and love. John's letter is plain in describing the unbroken flow of love. We might imagine it as the shape of the symbol of infinity, the figure eight on its side. The love between God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is infinite. The shape is a symbol, but the meaning is not simply static and two-dimensional. When we explore it, walk around it, pick it up and turn it over in our hopes and dreams, we learn that the breadth, depth, and length of love are also infinite. Love constantly turns towards us, pulses with life, shifts and expands to show you and me, in millions of ways, both large and small that in naming Jesus as God's Son, our lives are irrevocably marked by a pattern of love. Within this pattern there is another definable shape that is relationship and community. As God's love defines our reality, we begin to love all of God's children as God loves us. Our obedience to the commandment to love God, and love our neighbor as ourselves is shaped like a foundation stone, or like an anchor that grounds us in faith. It is also the shape of our identity in the cross that all God's children wear as an invisible mark on our foreheads. Or the curl of letters that make up our Christian names in which we are sealed by God in baptism, and named as God's own forever.

In the light of Christ, the shadow of our humanity always has the potential to take up the ugly and defacing graffiti of sin. When one of my brothers was about ten he got hold of a can of white spray paint and carefully etched out in inches as tall as his age the initials of his name on the front stone wall of our house. By the time my Mom saw it, the paint had run a little and dried on. With a great deal of scrubbing and gallons of turpentine she managed to fade and blur the letters. We all lived with the stain of that particular mischief for many years to come, before the cleansing rhythm of rain and sunshine left nothing but tiny white flecks as a reminder of that long ago folly. Sin is a fact of life, it stains and mars even the loveliest pattern of faithfulness, defacing us and splattering its messy consequences over anyone or anything that is close to us. John's letter says that God's commandments are not burdensome to the believer. For Jesus, who lived a sinless life, God's commandments were not at all burdensome. His will was so perfectly aligned to God's will that love and obedience were pure joy. For the rest of us, the reality is different.

In fact, most of our lives are a jagged, sharp-edged model in just how burdened our hearts can be,

especially when it comes to loving our neighbors. I can't speak for you, but I know my own irritation has spilled over on many occasions. In the pattern of my life it looks like a turbulent river of muddy, polluted effluent boiling in the dark gutters of my heart and mind. It has washed out many of the straight lines of peace, the elegant curves of graciousness, and the bubbly lines of joy. There will always be the noisy neighbor, who seems to delight in playing their stereo at two in the morning. We can't always avoid an encounter with the driver who cuts us off in traffic. Our hearts are easily stirred by fear when we meet people who look or speak differently to us. We struggle to love those who have pledged to be an enemy of all people and things American. That's life. It is how we deal with it that makes a difference or not in the patterns that form the picture of faithfulness in our lives. One thing is for sure, we can do nothing without God's help. Now when we start to examine all the angles does the picture we had of our own faithfulness shift and change any?

John tells us that our faith in Jesus Christ is the victory that conquers the world. We see faith that conquers the world with love in the big things like the ministry of Martin Luther King, Jr. who led the civil rights movement overturning the legal hurdles of systemic racism. Yet more often, we see faith that conquers the world with love in simple acts of hospitality and kindness. It is engraved in invitations for others to break bread with us. It is imprinted in passing along the gift of God's love to children. Victorious love is stenciled into the world through our prayers. It is writ large when we feed the hungry, love the unlovable, strive for peace, fight for justice, and give ourselves unreservedly each and every day to God's service. These are tangible signs of God's love, visible banners of obedience to God. Wherever culture and society would send us down fruitless paths, the reality of faith lifts our hands in joyful praise, and opens our arms wide to choose a better way. Knowing *about* God, faith or faithfulness is not the same as living it, as we know from the parable of the two sons whose father asks them to tend the vineyard. One says he will go and doesn't, the other says no, but changes his mind. Jesus asks us which of the boys was faithful and obedient. And we know that it was the son who responded by actually going to the vineyard, even though he said he would not. His brother simply pays lip service to obedience and faithfulness. What we do or don't do leaves an impression in the shape of our lives. The habits of our love in action through obedience to God's will and the faithful practice of spiritual disciplines mold a disciple's heart, and shape our character.

God's grace in action is that in Christ God enables the obedience that He asks of us. A faithful life sketched and colored by the hands of God brings glory to God's name and builds up the community of believers. As we each step into the circle of light that is the unbreakable bond of love between Father, Son and Holy Spirit, our own eyes are blessed with vision and insight. Vincent van Gogh also said this, "To believe in God ... is to feel that there is a God... a living one, who with irresistible force urges us towards more loving." All who know, believe and respond to Christ as Lord and Savior know that van Gogh is right on both accounts. In many ways life is round, it all begins and ends in God, and within the circle of life, it is God's desire that we are constantly turning towards the one who is Love. The more we know God in Christ Jesus, the more we love. The more we love, the more our vision and insight stretches and expands as the picture of our lives changes and grows in the Lord.

Amen.