May 19, 2019
Fifth Sunday of Easter (Year C)

Reading 1: Acts 14:21-27
Psalm: Ps 145: 8-9, 10-11, 12-13
Reading 2: Revelation 21:1-5a
Gospel: John 13:31-33a, 34-35

By Daniel Horan, OFM

It is striking that the one thing Jesus asks of his follower—to love one another as he has loved us—is the thing so often most visibly absent in the church and world. It’s such a simple request, so uncomplicated. And yet, it is one of the most difficult and challenging aspects of discipleship. Faced with its simplicity and straightforwardness, we often qualify and twist the Gospel to suit our comfort zones.

Several years ago Pope Francis took up this theme in a daily homily in which he reflected on what it means to be a follower of Christ. It’s not enough to merely look on at Christianity and Gospel from a distance, admiring it in theory but neglecting it in practice. “These are the two conditions in order to follow Jesus: to listen to the word of God, and to put it into practice. This is the Christian life—nothing more. Simple, simple. Maybe we’ve made it a little difficult, with many explanations that no one understands, but the Christian life is thus: listening to the Word of God and practicing it.”

I believe that Pope Francis is right: we self-identified followers of Christ have too often, and perhaps at times unwittingly, rejected the simplicity of the Gospel to include all sorts of qualifications and exceptions. Love our enemies? Sure, as long as they’re not labeled “terrorists.” Feed the hungry? Sure, as long they get a job first. Welcome the stranger, alien, orphan, and widow? Sure, as long as they do so through “legal” channels.

In today’s Gospel we travel back to a time before the passion, death, and resurrection. Jesus conveys a sense of urgency to his followers, acknowledging he is only going to be with them in the present form for a short period. Therefore, it is with a heightened sense that he tells those who want to be his disciples that love is the cornerstone and simple principle of authentic Christian life.

The simplicity of this message is what attracted those Paul and Barnabas preach to in the First Reading. They recognized that while simple, loving those society viewed as unlovable, would necessarily result in “many hardships.” It might mean the loss friends and family. It might mean
being called an enemy of the state. But to shy away from the mission of love, justice, and peace modeled by Christ is to abandon the call of discipleship.

Even internally there was strife. Our First Reading closes by reminding us of Paul’s mission to the Gentiles, which was opposed at first by many of the Twelve who were with the Lord from the beginning. To those who felt that Jesus’s ministry was intended only for the Jews were offended by Paul’s insistence that God’s love extends to all, including the uncircumcised.

In our own time there are communities of people that some Christians view as outside the church or unworthy of our time, attention, support, and love. We might think here of those with varying documented statuses or divorced and remarried couples or LGBTQ women and men or some other set of people. Today’s Gospel is as simple as they come and conveys a direct, nonnegotiable message: love one another. As we continue to celebrate the Easter season, calling to mind the cosmic significance of God’s raising Jesus from the dead, let us strive to be true disciples of the Risen Lord and love without condition, qualification, or complication.

Daniel P. Horan, OFM, PhD, is Assistant Professor of Systematic Theology and Spirituality at Catholic Theological Union, Chicago.