



Grace Lutheran Church
May 15, 2022 + Fifth Sunday of Easter
“Uncompromising” (John 13:31-35)

If you are one of those who claims all social media harm society and that Facebook is especially culpable, I can't really argue with you. But Facebook can be a positive tool, if used without political agendas for the purposes of mutual encouragement and uplifting. Just look at the

role it plays in our lives at Grace: We share photos, helpful news and four different live worship opportunities each week on our Facebook page. Today we are experimenting with broadcasting this entire service on Facebook Live.

Something else I've found to be helpful on Facebook are the groups. I imagine most of you on Facebook are part of certain groups that fit your interests. The ELCA Clergy and Lutheran Church Musicians groups have been particularly good for ideas and resources. Someone asks a question and thirty people are right there to help within the hour, and by the end of day dozens more have chimed in. One musician earlier this week was especially desperate to find a copy of the 1960s camp song "They'll Know We Are Christians by Our Love," which their pastor had requested presumably to go with this week's Gospel reading. [sing]

You will notice that WE have not chosen this as one of our hymns today, because I have a major problem with how people tend to hear these words: If showing love for others represents the sum total of how Christians are known, then ours is a shallow faith indeed.

Christianity is not simply a new law, the law of love, replacing the old law of every person for themselves. Showing love is a mark of discipleship, as Jesus says today. But if that's all there is to it, what has become of death and life? Why did Jesus have to die and what about all that came after that? Couldn't he have just taught people to love one another and let it go at that?

The truth is, if loving others is all there is to it, death is waiting to surprise you just around the bend. Let me give you a personal example that I hope does not cross the line into what is appropriate for a sermon and what is not.

When we lived in Birmingham, Alabama and I was an arts reporter for the Birmingham News, I quickly discovered the main thing going there was not music but the visual arts. Art was bursting out all over, and there was no end to the people I met, both trained and self-taught, who devoted every ounce of their being to expressing through art their joys and sorrows, their dreams and hopes, their pain and longing, and a spirituality that was wild and deep.

Here are two walking sticks that became the signature medium of a young man named Chris Clark who lived in poverty in Birmingham's inner-city the projects. Chris had a walking disability, so it became his practice to hobble around with a grocery cart collecting fallen branches that he would strip, sand and decorate with whatever he could find. His studio grew, and in 2005 Chris had his own show at the Smithsonian, which included walking sticks similar to these.

One of the first people to recognize Chris Clark's gift was a brilliant, exuberant local artist and gallery owner who I will call Louise. Outwardly Louise lived as the epitome of what one might call a

Christian, if they are known by their love. She loved everyone and they loved her in return. With a colleague, she founded an after-school art program for inner-city children, legions of whom went on to discover their voices in artmaking. These kids became her life. Louise would also share whatever she had with others, almost to a fault. If someone came to the back door asking for a handout, she gave them a banquet.

And yet Louise found the idea of Christianity peculiar and foreign, and was highly skeptical of my decision to go to seminary. Despite the love she lavished on others, I knew that privately she was tormented by demons of doubt. But I did not realize the extent to which these held her captive until I received the shocking news years after we left Birmingham that Louise had died—and when no cause of death is given or even referred to anywhere, you know what that usually means.

Why are we Christians? Not only to love one another, but to be set free from these same demons that are so good at getting the better of us -- unless we have Jesus on our side.

Having Jesus on our side means allowing the one who overcame death and the devil to do the same for us. [A Mighty Fortress, stanza 3]

And why specifically do we need Jesus on our side? Just listen to the apostle Paul, who knew better than any human being ever has. Let's listen to Paul in Romans 7:

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ¹⁶Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. ²⁰Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Now a champion comes to fight! But first we have to let him in. First we must open ourselves before God, to the fullness of who we are, the brokenness caused by these self-centered impulses at the center of our being that Paul describes. Then we must cry out to God our desperate need for forgiveness. But here's the amazing thing: In the same breath, we receive that forgiveness, that grace upon grace, that we could never have produced on our own. Our deep thirst is immediately satisfied by the spring of the water of life. We are washed in the river of grace that flows over us from the God who sees every one of our bobbles, missteps, and stumbles, the God who is fully aware of every human catastrophe that we cause, and yet still shouts into the cosmos while whispering at the same time into our ear: "I love you! You are mine! Nothing you do will ever change that!"

And time after time, we rise up out of the grave that we had dug for ourselves to receive this astonishing gift of new life. This is what it means to be a Christian. This is how we are known.

I wonder whether my friend Louise might still be with us if she had known this. What if she had been able to grasp how dearly, deeply, divinely loved she was by the God who created her? Would this have allowed her to then receive the love that everyone lavished on her, but which—I must assume—in the end she could not accept?

I don't know. But what I do know is that while it's easy to live a life of good works, it's much harder to believe that you are worthy of being made new. And yet here today we have that song coming

at us in Revelation, the song from the lamb on the throne, the song that will never end: "See, I am making all things new....I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end." Let THIS be the story we tell about why we are Christians, and let us waste no time in telling that same story to everyone we meet.

Amen.