

## **Love One Another**

**Acts 11: 1-18**

**John 13: 31-35**

Two and a half weeks ago, on April 14, a volcano in Iceland, thought to be dormant, erupted, creating air travel havoc. The red hot lava melted glacial ice causing immense flooding. Smoke and steam shot seven miles up into the air, and a cloud of volcanic ash began to drift slowly eastward. Twenty-four hours later, volcanic activity was still intensifying. The cloud blew across the Norwegian Sea toward Scandinavia and then southeast across the Shetland Isles as far as the north coast of Scotland. The plume of gritty ash doubled again and again until it eventually stretched across most of Western Europe. A national shut down of British airspace began at noon on April 15. Millions of travelers on both sides of the Atlantic were left stranded on the ground.

The stories of rescue didn't begin to trickle out until several days after the event. I first heard one on the car radio on my way home. A North Jersey woman, from what town I don't remember, simply drove to Newark Liberty Airport, parked her car in the short term lot, entered the terminal building and dove into the sea of stranded passengers. She selected a couple at random and offered to put them up at her home until a flight back to England became available.

It was a great story. I thought, 'I wish I could do that.' I mean, I could actually. Of course, there's some risk... Peter and I talked about it that evening. He had heard the story, too, and was moved by it. We could do that...we had had exchange students, and their families in our home for weeks at a time. We could do that... But we didn't.

Prudy and Rick Sweeny did though. Prudy was our church secretary before she retired at the end of last year. Her husband Rick is the pastor of the New Vernon Presbyterian Church. They heard the stories too, and they acted. Prudy stopped by for a visit last Wednesday and she told me how it came to pass.

They had been away for a few days, visiting grown children in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania. Catching up with the news, they read a story about a rescue similar to the one I'd heard on the radio and read about later on. They did the same thing as the woman in the story - got in the car and drove to Newark Airport. They were directed to the Continental baggage claim area, which they discovered had been converted into a hard campground, with tents and cots. They found a woman who seemed to be in charge and told her what they were there for. "Would you take these four young people?" was her almost desperate question. They said sure; they had come prepared to take up to six people.

The four young people were an engaged couple, the girl's twin sister and a friend, all from Southampton, England. They had come to New York just for a pleasure tour. Two of the women were in tears; they had reached the end of their resources, financial and physical. They had managed to find a hotel room in Irvington at \$89 a night and took a bus into Manhattan every day because that was the only place they were familiar with. They ate one meal a day, usually Papa John's pizza because it was the least expensive. Now they had maxed out their credit cards and were back at the airport, intending to try contacting the British embassy.

Rick and Prudy Sweeney were a godsend – and I mean, they were sent by God, armed with compassion and love, to rescue those four young people from Southampton, England. **What they, and many others like them, did**

**for strangers in need – and what others, like myself, did not do- point to issues that should concern the church.**

First off, why didn't I act on the idea? Why didn't Peter and I head off for Newark Airport? Risky, yes, to take in a stranger, but not really that risky. Disruptive to our busy schedules and organized days? Yes, but we could have made space. In truth, we had no really good reason.

And then, why didn't I think to motivate and mobilize members of this congregation to take in stranded strangers? Or to take homemade food to the airport? Or why didn't any of you think of it? Why didn't the churches closer to Newark make those kinds of efforts? Is our vision so narrow that we missed the opportunity to see this as an opportunity to act as disciples of Jesus, called to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger?

And - maybe I just didn't read about it – but why didn't airport or airline personnel think to call upon local churches and ask them for help? Is it because they don't know what church people do, or what church people ought to be thought of as doing? Are churches that self-contained, that self-centered?

And why did the ones who did act do so? I didn't read anywhere that it was because their faith motivated them. Who knows whether they were churchgoers or not?

Our Scripture passages for today point to these same issues. In the Gospel of John, Jesus gives a new commandment: *love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.* How far and wide does that love extend? How will people know that we are disciples of Jesus if we don't show love for one another? And

how will we really be disciples of Jesus if we don't show love for one another?

The kind of love that Jesus is talking about is not a feeling or an emotion, it is action. The kind of love that Jesus is talking about is not how God desires us to act or how he hopes that we behave. It is a commandment, an expectation, a requirement.

And then, the passage from Acts. Peter explains his vision – surely as dramatic as an erupting volcano – that resulted in his, and our, understanding that God is not to be contained in the synagogue, not to be tightly bound by religious rules and regulations and schedules that human beings have set in place. Peter did not want to obey God's command to eat the animals he saw in the vision because according to Jewish dietary laws they were unclean, not allowed. But God is in charge; God directs his actions; and God says to Peter: 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' In other words, God's love and salvation will go out beyond Jerusalem to the Gentiles, for the Holy Spirit has fallen upon them just as it had upon the apostles at Pentecost.

Peter and the others are hereby learning the depth and breadth of God's love, which they in turn are to extend to those who have been strangers, but who are now to be brothers and sisters in Christ. It is like hearing Jesus say: I give you a new commandment, that you love one another – all of you.

It is true that I don't know all the stories of rescuing strangers who were grounded by the volcano in Iceland and stranded in foreign territory.

And I don't even know all the details of the stories that I did read about.  
And I don't intend to give anyone – myself included – a guilty conscience.

But praise be to God for opening the world to us, for presenting us with outstanding opportunities to show God's love by showing love for one another. And strong be our prayer to pay attention to the Holy Spirit as it moves among us all to this very day – for we are all one in Christ. Amen.

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