

ECM Sunday May 6, 2018

Readings

Acts 10:44-48

1 John 5:1-6

John 15:9-17

Psalm 98

Loving Obedience

The Good News is a message of love. The Gospel, is literally the Good news, because it is the information that God loves us and through this love has reconciled us to Him through Christ Jesus. It is by these words that we are invited into relationship with the maker of the universe. To be in relationship with God therefore is to respond to a call of love, into love, through love. I would like us to think about this for a moment. **God offers us perfect love.** A love that redeems, reconciles, restores, heals and reconnects. A love so powerful that it raised Jesus from the dead, empowered the disciples to defy the Jewish authorities and the Roman rulers, to leave their homes and families and scatter through the world telling everyone, Jew and Gentile about this love. Love, is the central theme in the readings for today and the message I want to share.

If you will, take another look at the readings in our bulletin. You will notice that the first reading is taken from the book of Acts. Though written ostensibly by Luke, Peter is the speaker in these verses. Peter, we know is somewhat impetuous and brash. It was Peter who severed the ear of the soldier in the garden when Jesus was apprehended by the Jewish authorities and it was Peter who denied Jesus three times, and later still, Peter who Jesus three times asked to feed his sheep. Peter, was known as one of the chief apostles and when, after a life of preaching the gospel, he was told he would be crucified, he requested to be crucified upside down because he felt he was not worthy to share in the same death as our Lord Jesus Christ. When you think of Peter, do you remember that Peter was not only married but that his wife travelled with him, ministering and working with him? Or that his wife was crucified first? When we see Peter, do we see a married man toiling *with* his wife to spread the Gospel? Do we see a man who deeply and intimately knew the challenges, rewards and discipline of a loving relationship both with his God and his life partner? Do we see the devotion and love of his wife who lived and died with her husband for the Gospel? When we read the words of Peter, are we attendant to the centrality of the power of love in his life?

The Gospel of John is the book from which the next two readings are taken—and was written by the disciple who loved Jesus, who is not named. So, this author is anonymous but significant. **Can you imagine being known as the disciple who loved Jesus?** What could you have done to earn the moniker, “the one who loved the Lord?” Scholars tell us that the Gospel of John is different from the other synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. The Gospel of John offers more geographic details, historically accurate observations, and what may be termed “local color.” As a consequence, the Gospel of John tells us more about the life of Jesus, in ways that deviate from the narratives of Mark, Matthew and Luke. When you have time, it is an interesting

read. But to summarize, we can conclude that the author of the Gospel of John loved Jesus deeply and may have been moved by that love to write about Jesus's life. The writer seemed to have known and loved the land, its culture and people to render everything in such specific details. Again, love is the dominant theme.

The Holy Spirit is the next major persona we meet in the texts. The Holy Spirit also referred to as the Comforter. Perhaps the most clearly female aspect of the Trinity, is that aspect of the God-head which Jesus promised that he would send to be with us always. The one who inspires, comforts, animates, the one who is absolutely if not the most relatable, the most accessible because she is described as being akin to a loving Mother. Do we remember this aspect of God, the loving motherly aspect of God? Or that God himself compares his love for us to that of a mother in Isaiah 49:15 saying, "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget I will not forget you!" For those of us who were blessed to have a loving mother, do we remember the warmth of our mother's embrace? The smell of a loving grandmother's perfume caught briefly when a stranger walks by or the warm smile of that special aunt? Dads are great and getting a hug from a loving and kind father is a true treasure. But, a mother's hug? Mother hugs are different!

The loving maternal Holy Spirit which inspired Peter to preach according to the reading in Acts 10, fell upon everyone who **heard** Peter's preaching. So, the motherly warmth and love which inspired Peter to transcend his education, which was negligible, class status which as a fisherman was low, stand before multitudes and spread the message of love, was **received** by those who listened who in turn joined him in worshipping God. Peter was transformed by the Holy Spirit and in turn his listeners were transformed by the power of love. According to the text, this was known by their testimony. The text says they were extolling God; speaking of his love and power. Immediately upon seeing and hearing the words of these men and women Peter declared them ready to be baptized.

Now this is important, the text says that the crowd was mixed—Jews and Gentiles. We know that the first Christians were Jewish people who believed Jesus was the Messiah and had come to save the Jewish nation. The presence of Gentiles, in other words you and I, was controversial at best. Yet, under the influence of divine love, Peter recognized both Jews **and** Gentiles—circumcised and uncircumcised, to be the children of God. Peter preached to everyone, Jew and Gentile without exception and both responded to the invitation of love. Peter said, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" So, he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. The manifestation of love erased the boundaries between Jews and Gentiles, transformed relationships of alienation and difference into shared communion and blessing. Love.

Can you think of a relationship in your life which the Holy Spirit has transformed with the power of love? Who was it? A spouse, child, supervisor or most critically, yourself? Did you have to realize that God loved you exactly as you are and therefore you had a responsibility to love yourself?

To love someone else? What were the obstacles to accepting God's love for you? Were you not the favorite child? Told you were not smart enough? Skinny enough? In the eyes of society, the wrong gender or race, class, sexual orientation? How long did it take for you to realize that God loves you extravagantly and completely, exactly as you are? That God wants you to have life and have it more abundantly? That God loves you so much that he sent his son to reconcile you to himself? Just as the Holy Spirit first inspired Peter and then the multitude who heard him, God wants to love you. God is inviting each of us into his perfect love. God is calling us into a divine love relationship with him so that we, through our words and actions, will be enabled to love others. There is a pattern in our texts which begins in God, moves to a person who receives divine love which through word and deed is shared with others who are changed by their experience of God's love.

If you have received God's love, if you think you may have felt his touch, I have a question to ask you. Is there a person or group of people whom you believe God is waiting for you to give to Him, so that he can transform that relationship to one of love? A relationship that needs connection, not separation? What happens when we allow the power of the Holy Spirit to guide us? Since each of us is different I cannot predict what might happen in your life or when. But I can tell you what does happen if we resist this invitation to love. What happens when we do not speak, think and act from a place of love which seeks to include everyone? What happens is what we have seen recently in our nation: hatred, anger, oppression, vitriol.

We should always wonder what Jesus would do, but the answers are already clear and fortunately for us, written down in the Bible—Jesus would act with love and compassion to include everyone, to reconcile everyone, regardless of distinctions. As Christians, it is important to take a principled stand when we hear or see rhetoric or behaviors which engender divisions. We who have been empowered by the Holy Spirit can rest in the strength of the most High to effect the changes we would like to see in our spheres of influence. But how can we preach this Gospel of love? What can we do at work? At school? In the parking lot? The market? How can our lives reflect the light of the Holy Spirit which in turn will transform the day, night, evening, afternoon the lived life of someone else?

The Gospel is an invitation into a loving relationship with God. Peter, one of the greatest apostles who ever lived is more accurately described as a man whose life was defined by great passion and love. The nameless disciple who loved Jesus so much that this love displaced his or her *name*, wrote an entire gospel as an expression of love. The Holy Spirit is the transforming manifestation of the abiding love of God for us through Jesus the Christ, and through us to the world. Though as humans we are limited, broken and deeply flawed, yet we are the recipients and bearers of this perfect transforming love. What might that look like? How does perfect love meet us?

Many of you know that my father died recently. At 93, my father had lived a long life. As his children gathered around his bed in the hospital, one was missing. Allison was and is what is called,

in polite Jamaican company, an outside child. Daddy always claimed Allison and they had a relationship but there was always a distinction between her, a child fathered before he married therefore outside of his marriages to my mother and later still after she died to my stepmother, and us. At his deathbed, those difference were stark; she was not there. As his breathing became labored, everyone said their good byes. I announced that I was going to call Allison. One of my siblings protested and my stepmother made her displeasure clear. I persisted. Allison and her children and grandchildren spoke to Daddy. They told him how much they loved him, and they thanked him for being a good father, grandfather and great grandfather. As his breathing slowed, I quickly called Daddy's "Saturday list." Daddy had a Saturday list call list of all his children and a few nieces. He called each of us every Saturday morning. None of them were with us in the hospital room. Like Allison, each of them thanked him, celebrated him and wished him speed and comfort on his journey. The last person who spoke to him was my cousin Rosemary. Unknown to me, Daddy sang Cousin Rosemary a song every Saturday. That night, Rosemary sang her song to him. As she told him good bye, he took his last breath.

I would like to say I felt uplifted and inspired at his passing surrounded by love and loved ones. I would like to say that my family members affirmed my decision to connect Daddy to the wider group of people he loved as he transitioned. I would like to say all of that and more, but none of it would be true. What I do know, is that the people who shared their love with him because of my decision to share him with them, were touched. Before he died, I know that Daddy heard every single voice he has heard every Saturday, for several years. That every single person told him how much they loved him and appreciated him and wished him well. I believe this love ushered my father into the arms of pure love that awaits all of us who die in Christ. And I would like to think that my decision, which I have shared, from a place of hurt and mourning as you have heard it, gives a glimpse into a time in my life where I chose to think, act and speak from a place of love. A decision that spread, transformed and redeemed as the Holy Spirit inspires and enables us all.

The voice of Jesus closes our readings today and I am honoring him as Lord, Savior, friend and teacher by using his words to close. In the words recorded in the book of John, penned by the disciple who loved Jesus, Jesus commands us to choose to love.

Thank you,
Denise Burgher