

A Sermon Preached by Father Dwight D. Duncan, ssc - Rector, St Matthias', Dallas, Texas

5/21/2006

EASTER VI

I John 4:7-21, John 15:9-17, B

One of the strips in the Sunday comics is *The Wizard of Id*. A number of years ago, that comic strip featured a priest preaching lovingly from the pulpit. First frame: “Love is where it’s at, my children.” Second frame: “Love thine enemy.” Third frame: “Love thy neighbor.” Fourth frame: “Love one another.” Fifth frame: “Love is the way.”

Final frame: The liturgy now over, the priest is greeting the congregation at the door of the church. Forcing a smile as he shakes hands with each departing worshiper, he is saying to himself, “This is the part I hate the most.”

Well, it’s easy to talk about love, isn’t it? And it’s easy to say, “I love you.” But doing it is another thing altogether. Why? Because true loving is something which is not fueled by pleasant, warm, or passionate feelings. NO, real loving arises from our wills, in response to a fact which our intellect has embraced. (*Explain the workings of our intellect, will and feelings.*)

Here is the fact, the truth, which our intellects must embrace in order for us to begin to be able to love truly: Every created thing is precious to and treasured by him who created all things. Nothing would exist, not even myself, if God did not find it a delightful thought within his great mind, a thought worthy of existence, sustenance, and redemption. And this great God delights so much in his thoughts that when one of them, that thought which is you and I – humanity, spoiled his creation through sin, became himself a thought like us within his creation and, to manifest his love for us, allowed us to extinguish him.

When our minds embrace and submit to this fact, real love can be born in us and lived by us. We are empowered to make a decision to do and to give our best for someone other than ourselves, regardless of how we feel about them, but simply because they, like we, come from God and are precious in his sight. We then are able to decide to do unto them as we would have them do unto us.

THAT is what loving is: An act of the will whereby we freely and fully choose to place the needs and whims, the welfare and the interests of someone else before our own. THAT is love: an act of the will whereby we choose to give of ourselves and our substance, regardless of what we receive back or even whether we receive back at all. THAT is love: an act of the will whereby we choose to serve others instead of waiting around to be served and whether or not we are served at all. And THAT is hard, because what we are doing is sacrificing ourselves for someone else.

Now, where is this true form of love learned, where is the ability to “do it” constructed in us? Those with knowledge of human growth and development would surely tell us that love is learned (or *not* learned) in the nesting ground of our families. Ideally, it is within the family, through selfless nurturing of us, and unconditional caring of and giving to us, that we experience and learn love, and become capable of loving.

St John, however, from whom we have heard twice this day, goes beyond the human community to reveal the ground out of which real love grows:

“... love, John says, is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God; for God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to suffer the penalty for and pay the price of our sins.” And then John applies this great reality in very practical terms, terms applicable to each of us, terms beneficial for all the world if we would struggle to fulfill them: *“Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.”*

Exactly: If God so loved us, we also ought to love one another, and in the same way that God loves us. Indeed, the Jesus who loved us to death and resurrection, has commanded this of us: *“This is my commandment,”* he says, *“love one another as I have loved you.”*

BUT, even though we may say yes to Jesus’ command, even though we may know that love is not a feeling but an act of the will to be and do the best for others, we can be hampered in our efforts to grow in loving by a lack of clarity as to what love looks like in an ordinary human life. I find for myself that when “skin” can be put on “bones” I am aided in my understanding and in my doing. A woman by the name of Amy Carmichael can help us here.

Amy lived from 1867 to 1951, a fellow Anglican and an author and missionary to India. She coined a phrase for the love which Christ’s disciples are called to exercise: “Calvary Love.” In an essay*, she well played out what that looks like in a human life.

Drawing upon her wisdom, let me try to do that for you, by the use of negatives ... in other words, ways in which we humans can fail to live out Calvary Love. Listen carefully and think about yourself:

- If I belittle those whom I am called to serve, pointing out **their** weak points in contrast with what I consider **my** virtues, I am not living Calvary Love.
- If I can enjoy a joke, ethnic or otherwise, at another’s expense, I am not living Calvary Love.
- If I accept slighting another person in conversation, I am not living Calvary Love.
- If my attitude is one of fear and not faith, if I am afraid to speak the truth lest I lose someone’s affection, I am not living Calvary Love.
- If I take offense easily, if I am content to harbor a hurt although friendship be possible, I am not living Calvary Love.
- If I cannot in honest happiness take the second place or the twentieth, OR if I cannot accept the first place without making a fuss about my unworthiness, I am not living Calvary Love.
- If my interest in the work and the preferences and opinions of others is cool; if I think mostly in terms of *my* work, *my* preferences, *my* opinions; if the burdens *and* the joys of others are not mine as well, I am not living Calvary Love.
- If the praise of others elates me and blame or criticism deflates me; if I cannot rest under what I consider a misunderstanding of me without mounting a defense of myself; if I live to be loved more than to love, to be served more than to serve, I am not living Calvary Love.

- If I wonder why I must struggle and suffer at times, and if I press God in prayer that all such things be removed from my life; if I cannot be trusted to endure any disappointment and cannot go on in peace under any mystery, I am not living Calvary Love.
 - If I allow injustice to be perpetrated and say nothing, if I permit wars to be plotted and do nothing, if I see the oppression of others as the solution to conflict, I am not living Calvary Love.
- Calvary Love. **This** is that “no greater love” of which Jesus spoke, a love which is willing to lay down one’s self in the service of others and to surrender one’s ego and its desires for their greater good and that of the community. **This** is the love we have known in Jesus. **This** is the love to which we, Jesus’ friends, are called and to which each of us must aspire, not just in thought, but in deed, by being willing to struggle, day by day, to live it out. We need God’s help for the struggle; he gives it at this altar and in the blessed community of the Church.

And here is a wonderful thing. If each of us will engage ourselves in the struggle to love others as Christ loves us, then those who have known no such love or little of it, and so have been hampered in their loving, will learn it from us. And for us all, then, our life together will become more as it is in heaven.

* “Calvary Love” in *Bread & Wine* (Plough Publishing House, Farmington, PA: 2003)