

The Love That Makes Life Make Sense

Ephesians 1:3-10; 1 John 1:1-4

Three of the first five days Natalie and I vacationed in Ireland, we had to hike through some variation of soaking mist and pelting rain with the result that by the time we pulled into a little hill town in western Ireland called Lisdoonvarna most of our gear was somewhere between damp and soaked and I was experiencing that familiar overseas syndrome known as laundry anxiety. Lisdoonvarna was no help in that regard. Their laundromat was only open between 10am and 6pm, precisely the hours we wanted to be out on the trail.

So I was a distracted man in musty clothes that Sunday when we attended services at Corpus Christi, the little Catholic church in the village. I expected a quaint, simple country mass and so I was more than a little surprised when the priest opened the service with a brief word of welcome and then he launched into a summary of that morning's Scripture readings which included the Call to Worship you and I read to open our service here this morning.

If you look in your bulletins, Ephesians 1, verses 3 through 10 is the Apostle Paul's majestic summary of how, before the beginning of time, the love and sacrifice expressed by God the Son in human flesh was what the Almighty had in mind back when he was weaving the universe together into that vast system of substances and forces and creatures whose story would unfold so that God's greatness and goodness and power and beauty was expressed in a way that all could see and no one could deny.

So that, at the end of time, the angels in heaven, and men and women on earth, and even the demons in their shadowy abodes would all have to bow and acknowledge the goodness and majesty of the God who made them. That was what was in God's heart and mind before he began to speak the words that would set apart light from darkness and set into motion all the galaxies and stars and oceans and continents which became the stage for this vast struggle which would finally see God the Son take center stage and express the love that God always possessed and always wanted to share with people like us.

So this priest said all this in his opening remarks, before the service even started and then he raced through the service itself and let all these passages wash over us without ever pausing for another word of sermon. He let the Scriptures tell the story and he let the sacrament become place where we responded to God's love to the extent we could make hide nor tail out of anything the priest had said.

All I can say for this guy was that by the time he was done I wasn't thinking about laundry any more. I was thinking about love. Paul wrote in our Call to Worship that *"In love, God predestined us for adoption as children through Jesus Christ..."* The point being that, from all eternity past, love has been the center thread around which reality has always been woven. There was always love.

The God we worship, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, has always ever existed in a love relationship in which Father, Son and Spirit have always loved and honored and lifted each other up without any of the sort of doubt and conflict and fear and rivalry that bend and break and complicate our relationships, fallen creatures that we are. The Fall has changed everything for us, has moved simple, holy love beyond our reach, and the fact that God allowed a Fall is a puzzler that no one has entirely unraveled and many of us have broken our hearts trying.

But the point of the passage I just read to you from John's first letter is that the appearance of God the Son in human flesh, a voice John could hear, a man John could see, whose expression John could read, whose shoulders John could embrace, Jesus of Nazareth, living out love uncomplicated by sin and fall, became for John in his old age the solution to all the riddles and puzzles and heartbreaks and tragedies that hamper and tangle us whenever we set our hearts to love someone.

The old man seems to tremble as he tries to put it into words, *"What was from the beginning,"* he writes, *"what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we gazed at and our hands touched concerning the Word of life...and the life was expressed and we have seen and testify and announce to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made visible to us..."*.

in other words, as ordinary as Jesus must have appeared, dressed like a peasant tradesman, hands calloused from his stepfather's woodshop, feet dusty and worn from the trail, the man Jesus expressed a love and an insight and a power that was clearly from somewhere none of the disciples had ever been. Jesus possessed a love that was more than able to transcend the absurdity and complexity that has hounded human relationships since the Fall. Because our problem as sinners is not that we have lost the taste for love. We need and want love no matter how sinful we become.

Our problem is that, having lost touch with God, having rejected the wisdom and insight and authority God has and we need govern our affections, the love we long for has become unstable, dishonest, selfish to the point of destroying others, needy to the point of destroying ourselves and the only way we can regain our balance is to find love and learn love from God, the one Person who alone has always possessed and understood it. And so from the beginning of time, the

history of the world had unfolded toward that day when God the Son would live out that love as the man Jesus.

And when Jesus appeared, John was there in his father's boat next to his brother James, and from that moment life would never be the same for John. The gospel John wrote is full of stories of how the love of Jesus transformed every situation he ever encountered. Jesus breathed life and love and the Spirit's power into the pompous, barren religion of Nicodemus the Teacher of Israel. Jesus brought love to the Samaritan woman who had married five times looking for it and he promised her that soon she would worship the Father in Spirit and in truth.

A few weeks ago, on Founder's Sunday, we looked at this passage in light of Jesus' interview with Peter after the resurrection on a Galilean beach, when Jesus found a moment after breakfast to love Peter even though Peter had not been able to keep the brave promises he'd made to Jesus on the night of the Last Supper. Three times Peter had denied Jesus and three times Jesus asked Peter about love. Three times Peter was more humble and modest than he had been before his failure. "*You know that I'm fond of you!*", Peter said. It was not the same verb Jesus was using for love, but it was the truth and the truth was enough to prompt Jesus to encourage Peter to let his failure go. He told Peter to resume being a leader for God: "*Feed my sheep!*"

In our Call to Worship, Paul wrote, "*In love...before the foundation of the world...God predestined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ...to the praise of his glorious grace with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.*" The Beloved of the Father is Jesus and the point of his having become a man and lived out God's love in flesh and blood was to prove to people like you and me that the Creator of the universe is not some uninvolved, impersonal, master Autocrat with no stake in the game, no heart for his creatures.

To the contrary, Christ became subject to the very curse the Father's justice demands against us for our sins. So the Father became subject to the very grief we all feel when someone we love goes down. As a young man, John stood under the cross watching Jesus in his death throes, the mother of Jesus weeping at his side. And that day John saw the Father turn the sky dark as Jesus bore the grief and sorrow of being estranged from the Father he had only ever loved from all eternity past. He was estranged from the Father he loved so that we could be reconciled, and experience for ourselves what it is like to be loved entirely with "*no change or shifting shadow*".

The "*glory of God's grace*", as Paul puts it, is that it is entirely his to give and he gives it to us, no questions asked, as his Spirit puts it in us to love and trust his Son. So John goes on to write, "*What we have seen and heard, we proclaim also to you that you may have fellowship with us and our fellowship is with God the Father and Jesus Christ his Son.*" And the point here in John's letter is that the appearance of God the Son as a flesh and blood individual on a beach in Galilee to ordinary fishermen was to establish a "*fellowship*", founded on the love relationship

that has always existed between Father, Son and Spirit and then for his disciples to share this fellowship with ordinary flesh and blood individuals all over the world who will believe in Jesus as God's Son and who will be subject to the disciplines that go with believing in and belonging to a kingdom where we are not king.

The point being that a fellowship is not a free association. James and John and Peter and Andrew did not leave their fishing boats in Galilee, Matthew did not leave his toll booth to hang around the countryside with Jesus and become his buddies. They left home and family and work and community because they believed Jesus was the Christ and they knew they had a duty to stand with him and labor at his side to see his kingdom built with whatever wits and resources they could bring to the task. The best evidence suggests that when John finally wrote this letter late in life his work as an Apostle of Jesus had brought him to the great port cities of on the west coast of what is now Turkey, which is a long way from his father's fishing business in Galilee.

Fellowships are more formal and demanding and less voluntary than ordinary friendships. To belong to a fellowship is to forfeit rights and to take on duties. You can be in fellowship with people you don't like, people with whom you don't have much in common other than that higher calling which puts you side by side performing the duty you share in common. But ironically it is fellowships that impose duty and demand sacrifice that often become the place where we make our closest friendships. Because in God's kingdom love grows out of the faithfulness and sacrifice that comes from knowing and following Christ together and being subject to the duties and disciplines his covenant imposes on us all.

In John's gospel, after three years of rigorous training and service, Jesus said to his twelve closest disciples, *"This is my commandment, that you love one another. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I heard from the Father I have made known to you. ..."*. If we're really paying attention, I think it throws us to see words like love and friendship living in the same paragraph with terms commandment and servant.

Because we moderns conceive of love and friendship as being free and voluntary. But in God's kingdom, love involves learning and obeying a common covenant together, loving and obeying Jesus as Savior and Lord. Real love begins to wither away the moment we allow ourselves to think of church as a discretionary activity. Friendship is the bonus that grows from faithfulness and obedience. Because the truth is that duty and love live in the same house. They breathe the same air.

One of my favorite examples of Christ's love overcoming sin and confusion is Mary Magdalene in the John's resurrection account. Mary is renowned for being the woman whom Jesus freed from seven demons, and who then joined his entourage and served and provided for his ministry. John remembers her alone in the garden, looking for Jesus in the confusion of the first hours after the resurrection.

When she finds and recognizes him, she envelopes him in an embrace that speaks of all the intensity a woman could feel for someone near and dear. But curiously, she addresses him by his official title, "*Rabboni!*". And Jesus is notable, first for accepting her embrace and then for telling her to stop. He has a duty, to go to his Father. And he assigns her the duty of announcing to their "*brothers*", that Jesus' Father has become "*your Father*", Jesus' God is "*your God*".

The point being that the love that exists between Father, Son and Spirit, the fellowship they share and that we've been invited to join are intense. It is a love relationship, warm and fraught with commitment and sacrifice. Jesus washed his disciples' feet, he embraced them warmly and at times rebuked them sharply. But this fellowship John invites us to join is also holy, defined by the boundaries of calling and covenant. At the end of his First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul exhorts the believer in Corinthian to greet one another with a "*holy kiss*". We are to be warm enough to be close and disciplined enough to be holy.