

Gospel – John 15:9-17

Jesus said to his disciples:

"As the Father loves me, so I also love you.

Remain in my love.

If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love,
just as I have kept my Father's commandments
and remain in his love.

"I have told you this so that my joy may be in you
and your joy might be complete.

This is my commandment: love one another as I love you.

No one has greater love than this,
to lay down one's life for one's friends.

You are my friends if you do what I command you.

I no longer call you slaves,
because a slave does not know what his master is doing.

I have called you friends,
because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father.

It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you
and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain,
so that whatever you ask the Father in my name he may give you.

This I command you: love one another."

Gospel Study – *Love is Our Mission*

If your doctor were to inform you that you would probably die within a day or two, what would you do? I'd probably die on the spot! I imagine many of us would surround ourselves very closely with our family and our most intimate friends. If you did that, what would you be sure to say to them? What would you leave with them? What would you do with them? This is exactly the context and setting of this Gospel we just read. Jesus knows his hour has come when he will pass from this life to the father in the next world.

Therefore he gathers his closest family and friends together, his disciples, and he says to them what matters most to him (and I suppose to most of us) first and foremost how much he loves them. He also says how much he wants them to love one another. This is Jesus' last will and testament that becomes the theme of the New Testament that we hand on generation after generation. This Gospel that we look at today, is a Gospel of love. In the short eight verses here, love is used eight times. In the very first line, in the middle and in the end, we hear Jesus not only asking his disciples to love, but even commanding them to love. In the strongest passion, he

says to them, "Love one another as I have loved you." There is a two pronged appeal to them, reminding them that he truly loves them and asking them to share this love with others.

Let's take some time to look at the word love, because we use it so often and hear it being written and sung about. We talk about it so much and we say things like, "I just love Graeter's ice cream." (Which I can appreciate.) Or there are bumper stickers all the time saying *I heart love my cat or my dog or this city or that city*. I even saw one bumper sticker that said *I heart love bumper stickers*. We use the word so liberally that we lose a sense of its deepest meaning when used in a sublime sense (which is how Jesus uses it in this Gospel).

That is probably because in English we have only one word for the word love. The Gospels were written in Greek which commonly used three words for *love*; two of them prominently appear in the New Testament. The first word the Greeks had for love is *eros* from which we have the word *erotic*. *Eros* refers to a more sexual love which is a good love meaning a strong energy and chemistry between two people that are sexually bonded to each other. A second love sometimes used in the New Testament (and used in this Gospel today) is the word *philia* from which we have the word Philadelphia. It meant brotherly or sisterly or type of familiar/fraternal love. It suggests a certain affection. Finally we have the word *agape* which is the Greek word that means a sacrificial love; laying one's life down. It is the highest degree of love that characterizes divine depth of loving.

As we look at this Gospel we need to know when Jesus says, "As the father has loved me, so I have loved you. Live on in this love." He's using the word *agape*. "As the father has given everything over to me, I now get everything of my life over to you. Now may you give everything of your life over to each other." Now we begin to appreciate the depths of this love that we are called to enjoy and share with each other. As we consider this *agape* love, Jesus suggests three ways in which this love needs to be expressed.

Agape love is not a feeling, as in the feeling of affection. It is a decision and in the Hebrew's sense the love was expressed in the heart, but the heart was a place of the will where you decide to do something that was right rather than something you felt like doing. You did it because you knew it was right. In the Mediterranean world affection was not necessarily their definition of a married love. In Jesus' world where marriages were pre-arranged you didn't fall in love because you oftentimes met your wife or husband on your wedding day. They learned how to love each other.

This is depicted beautifully in the famous Broadway musical *Fiddler on the Roof*. In that play Tevya, the husband says to his wife Goldie on their 25th anniversary, "Goldie do you love me?" Goldie said, "Do I what? What does this have to do with it?" Then they share with each other, 'Remember on our wedding day, I was scared, I was shy, I was nervous, so was I, but my father and my mother said we'd learn to love each other. I'm asking you Goldie, do you love me?' She says, "I'm your wife." "I know but do you love me?" Then she says, "I suppose I do." And he says, "I suppose I do too. For 25 years it doesn't change a thing but after 25 years it's nice to know."

Anyway we have that sense of a world in which one decides to love. I've learned this is such an important matter from people involved in marriage encounter. They talk about those days when romance is gone. The honeymoon is long over. Difficulties have pervaded their love and all one can do is make a deep down decision: "I will keep loving. I will keep being committed to my commitment to love." That's how Jesus loves us and asks us to love others. Even enemies can love one another.

This is what Jesus asked of people when he walked that same land. This is what separate Jesus' teaching from any other teaching of his time. No one up to that time preached such a love of one's enemy. They preached a national kind of love for the people in your own country, but never for an enemy. This is what Jesus asks.

I am reminded of a father who has several sons who are continually fighting at home and his favorite line to them is, "How in the world do you expect that there will be peace in the Middle East if there isn't peace in this house? I'm not asking you to necessarily hug each other, I'm just saying don't kill each other." Jesus would say that he is not asking us to like everybody, that would be impossible. He asks us to be loving to everybody; to be forgiving to everybody; to be kind to everybody. Even that can seem and feel impossible at times. That is clearly and emphatically what Jesus asks and commands us to do. This is what characterizes a true Christian. He will know you are Christian by your *agape* love.

Secondly, this *agape* love, Jesus says, is not about admitting or saying, 'Okay I love you.' Jesus says, "You will live in my love if you keep my commandments." Further he says, "There is no greater love than this, than to lay down one's life for one's friends." This has such powerful meaning considering the following day Jesus laid down his life for his friends. The best definition of *agape* love is what we see in the crucifixion: selfless service, complete giving of one's life for others. This is the kind of sacrifice the Lord asks us to make for each other. We

must be willing to accept whatever sacrifice may be entailed to help another person grow. Often times that comes as tough love more than tender love.

When people are caught in a destructive relationship, I suggest to them that they love each other a little bit more and do what's best for that other person's growth and welfare. Many times this means giving up what we're holding on to in a possessive way that's more selfish than self-sacrificing. We see a contemporary example of this action of love in South Africa and Nelson Mandela who sacrificed himself by going to prison for life to stand up for the rights of his people. This is the kind of love that we are being called to whenever we stand up for the rights of the unborn or the rights of others. Nelson Mandela represents this movement of action against the apartheid; which is so hurtful of human rights; which is so anti-Gospel to what Jesus taught: that all people are equal; that all people deserve our respect and human dignity.

There are many other examples closer to home but I cannot help celebrating these historic occasions, knowing that there's been such a long struggle over the years in South Africa. We rejoice because a victory of justice anywhere is a victory of justice everywhere. That's why I was interested to see Coretta Scott King standing at Nelson Mandela's side celebrating his election as President of South Africa. It reminds us of her husband [Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr] who overcame the apartheid prejudice and discrimination in this country against African Americans. Love calls us to action.

Finally, Jesus seems to suggest that love is not only a decision, it is not only an action, love is our very mission in life. Jesus concludes here by saying that they may go and bear fruit; that your fruit must endure. Jesus means the fruit from the missionary work that he was sending his Apostles out to do. They were to be his ambassadors of love which is the primary Gospel message. He says, "By this, all shall know you are my disciples...by the love you have for one another." Remember, they celebrated this at the last supper meal. That experience was filled with Jesus' outpouring of love for his friends.

Later on the early Christians, when they came together to celebrate the Lord's supper, celebrated it in the context of a meal. They called that meal the *agape* meal because their sharing together was just like Jesus sharing himself with them. As we participate in the sacrifice of the mass, we need to remember that we are called to give more of our self so that we could receive more of the Lord. At this meal we have communion not only with Jesus, but communion with each other: The body of Christ at large.

This is the *agape* meal we are called to receive. One way to grow in this divine depth of love is by asking the Lord, when we receive him in communion, for his heart of love so that we might overcome our limitations and do more than we are capable of on our own. Our love is limited by our moods, our disposition, or the situation we're in. We might say, "I just can't stand this or I can't do this anymore." We're probably right; that's true. Instead then, we need to call on God's love.

That is the one secret I believe to the sanctity and ministry of Mother Teresa who begins every day celebrating the Eucharist and praying for the Lord's love with her Missionaries of Charity sisters so that they could take the Lord's love with them to all they meet on the street that day. That's what we need to do: to pray each day for that *agape* love; especially for those people who are so hard to relate to and impossible to like.

Jesus asks and commands his disciples to love in this way and reminds them of his love, but there's one other really touching point of this Gospel and that is Jesus says, "I do call you friends. I don't call you servants anymore." We think of servants in maybe the most pejorative sense, but really to be a servant of the Lord carries great dignity. That is a great ministry in itself. We pride ourselves on being servants of the Lord, but Jesus says to us as he did to his disciples, "You are much more than that." I not only lay down my life for you, but I want you to know, I also like you. I like you. I feel the deepest affection for you and more than that, a deep passion for you." That word is *philia* that Jesus uses. He has every degree of love for us.

Another wonderful point to consider is that Jesus says, "All this I tell you that my joy may be yours and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment that you love one another." I suggest that joy is the byproduct of living a loving life and certainly anyone who sets out to be happy will be like a dog chasing its tail. It just doesn't work because you're always asking yourself, "Am I happy yet?" Or, "Are we having fun yet?" It will always elude us. The great paradox is this. We would think that anyone who sacrifices him or herself so much, would lose himself so much, that there would be nothing left to enjoy.

That paradox is: Look around you. Tell me in your mind who is the most loving person you know and I will tell you it's a truly joyful person. Almost inevitably the most loving people we know are people who in a deep down way have this certain peace and joy about them. This peace and joy are the most infallible signs of God's presence.

I conclude this commentary with an example that I think is fitting considering that Sunday is Mother's Day. If there is ever a group of people that exemplify this lesson of love, that love is

sacrifice; that love is a decision that always calls us to action, it's mothers. From the very moment of giving birth, mothers give up something of themselves. They lay a part of their life aside to foster and nurture this life. Someone once said, "Being a mother is a courageous thing because it's like watching your heart that's always outside your body." There is something true about that and I guess it's true of good fathers too. Amen.