

Acts 10:44-48; Psalm 98
1 John 5:1-6; John 15:9-17

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Love. That word we hear all over the place. Love. Our Gospel lesson today centers on love; but, what is love? There are about 1 billion, 710 million web search results on Google for the word love. It is a wonderful site, like “True Love Test.” I liked this—“The Love Calculator,” and the *Love* magazine, if you want to read more. And, “How to Love,” and how about this one, “PA Dating”—just in case you need somebody. Not to mention all the love songs and love quotes. But, what does love mean. It is a word bandied about so much, that it begins to lose all its meaning. We end up needing to clarify that word every time we use it.

Now, love can mean affection, friendship, erotic love, enjoyment of a person or thing. It can mean parental love, or social love, or patriotic love of one’s country. John’s lesson for today, talks about a different kind of love. A divine love. As Jesus says, “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you.” This is a divine love, a love beyond human understanding, an unconditional love. God’s love extends to every single person, regardless of who, or where, or what that person has done. The message of God’s unconditional love runs through the entire Bible, beginning at the very first chapter of Genesis.

This season of Easter, our lessons focus on God’s love. Easter, a time of joy, Alleluias, and God’s divine love. Jesus gives us a joyous command to keep his commandments. “Love the Lord your God, and love your neighbor as yourself.” He is quoting from the 6th chapter of Deuteronomy, part of the Torah, the Jewish law of Moses, that he had studied all his life time. These two commandments cover all the Ten Commandments; in fact, all the individual laws, and in Jewish law, that is 613 laws, which I would have a hard time keeping track of, and it boils down to love of God and love of others. Hmm – not bad, if there are just two pretty clear laws. That shouldn’t be too hard to keep track of.

Well, maybe then, we had better think again. So, I asked God, “What does this mean? I love my husband, my children, my gorgeous granddaughter, friends and relatives.” “Not enough,” God says, “Anyone can do that.” “Well, I try to love the people in my town. Even some of those who are not always so nice to me.” “Still not enough,” God says. “How much further do I need to go God? No! Not someone evil like, Saddam Ben Laden?” “Yes, that is right,” God says, “even he is one of my children.” “Oh no, God. How can that be? Look what he has done to so many people and to so many women. He has no respect for anyone, except a very few of his own. He has even twisted the teaching of the Koran and of Mohamad, and urged the killing of any non-Muslim and even many Muslims.” But, God replies, “I love every single person. Unlike you humans, my love is pure. It is also an action, a verb. Love is reaching out to you, choosing you. I sacrificed my only son to save you, to redeem you from sin and evil. My grace, my free gift, is given to each one of you.” “But God, why? Why do I need to love someone like Saddam Ben Laden?” God replied, “As my son tells you, this is my commandment, that you love one another

as I have loved you. My love abides in you. I choose you to let my love flow through you, so that it might produce fruit.”

Now, on our own, we can't love those we hate or we see as evil. Our love toward those people, is not our own, but, it is the love of Jesus Christ. He prayed and he died for them. Jew, Gentile, everyone. As Peter, in our lesson from Acts, is speaking, the Holy Spirit falls upon all, Jew and Gentile. So, everyone means everyone. I had a friend who told me once that he hates all Muslims. I also had a student one time who told me that her Mother hates all Hispanics. Both of these people profess to be Christians. And then there are some others who say they love humanity, but they don't really like those who look different, who look dirty, who are not like us. Well, the only answer is Jesus Christ. His love flows through us, only then, can our love flow onto others. Christ's love flowing through us is selfless. It expects nothing in return. It does not puff up our egos.

In Jewish practice, there are certain people, the Chevra Kadisha, the “Sacred Society,” who wash, prepare, and sit with the body of a person who has died. The deeds of these people carry great honor because of their loving kindness and their selflessness. They can never expect that the dead person would ever be able to repay them. Great love requires no repayment. But the greatest love, Jesus says, is when one person lays down that person's life for another. Jesus laid down his life for us, divine and selfless love. The true Pascal mystery.

In a story I read recently, two Afghani women with different backgrounds and lives, came together. The older one became the wife of an abusive man in Afghanistan, and later under the Taliban, so does the younger one. The younger wife gives birth to two children and as times become tougher, the husband becomes even more abusive, both physically and mentally. The only happiness that the elder one had during her entire life time, was the time spent with the younger wife and the children. But the last straw came when the husband, while beating both of them, tried to strangle the younger one. The elder wife grabs a shovel and kills the husband by hitting him over the head. Both wives know what their fate will be at the hand of the Taliban. The elder though, convinces the younger wife and her children to flee, with the aid and protection of a friend. As expected, the older wife, is arrested, tried, and executed, but she made the ultimate sacrifice to save the others, showing that greatest love that Jesus describes.

Jesus' ultimate sacrifice of death and resurrection, is the victory of divine love over sin and evil. He instructs us to pray for those who hate us and persecute us. Dietrich Bonhoeffer says that this command is the supreme demand. He continues by saying, through the medium of prayer we go to our enemies. We stand by their side and plea for them to God. Jesus does not promise that when we bless our enemies, and do good to them, they might not spitefully use and persecute us. Their persecution of us only serves to bring them closer to reconciliation with God and, to further the triumphs of love. God works in ways that are still very mysterious to us. But, he tells us, it is hard to continue to hate someone for whom you continue to pray.

Jesus chose his disciples and fills them with his love and joy and peace. His joy is not just giddy happiness, or a fleeting moment, but, as he says, a joy that may be complete. Jesus charges his disciples to be emissaries to all people and to bear fruit. Likewise, he charges us not to retreat into ourselves, but to go as a bridgehead into the world. To act with love, to aid others with food, clothing, or shelter. Or, even to do as Paul Tellic said, “The first duty of love is to listen.”

May our Easter love grow, as God's love shines through us onto others. Pure unselfish love. Jesus said I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. From Psalm 98 we read, "Remember his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God."

God bless you with his love, now and forever. Amen.