

The Sixth Sunday of Easter + May 29, 2011

According to legend, the Apostle John, when he was advanced in years and was given the task of preaching would essentially repeat the same sermon. He would say “Love God and love your neighbor as you love yourself. Amen.” End of sermon. Talk about an all time short sermon! Yet, in a few short sentences old John said what really needed to be said. It’s all about love anyway, isn’t it?

On the other hand, I will always remember the advice of the late Krister Stendahl, Lutheran Bishop of Sweden and a great scholar of the New Testament. I heard Stendahl speak before a number of pastors at a conference in Oregon years ago. Stendahl said, quite adamantly, that we should never use the word love in our sermons. For him the word was too problematic. The word love, contended Stendahl, is so laden with sentimentality and so misused that its meaning has been lost and the best strategy is to avoid using the word at all.

I want to listen to both these preachers. The great apostle had it right. Life in Christ is all about love. What more can be said? Bishop Stendahl had it right, too. Christian love is tough to talk about. Not only is it a challenge to describe it is a challenge to live. What does love mean anyway?

We need some help. Not just the preacher who proclaims love but all of us who claim the name of Jesus. What does it mean to love in the way Jesus commands? It is easy to reduce love to mere feeling or sentimentality. When that happens Jesus’ radical summons to love others become small, self-serving and hardly relevant. So, we need help not just to speak of love but to practice love!

Well, here is the good news. It is early on in the sermon and I’ve already gotten to the good news and it is this: God gives us the help we need. Jesus is pretty clear. If you love me you will keep my commandments. Then Jesus follows up this command with an amazing promise. “And I will ask the Father and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth...” Jesus goes on to say that though we do not see this Holy Spirit of God we know the Spirit of God for it is the very help given by God for those who live and dwell in Christ.

Do we have trouble sometimes figuring out the call to love as Jesus loves let alone talk about it? Well, the good news is that we have help. Jesus gives us the Spirit to stand beside us. Here in this passage Jesus describes the Spirit as Advocate, one who stands next to us or alongside us. One who is there for us and one who helps us. When I think of an advocate I immediately think of the vaunted image of the attorney. When I was a kid I watched all those *Perry Mason* reruns and he was something of a hero in my mind because he was always advocating for the person though charge guilty was truly innocent. You can be an advocate, though, without being Perry Mason. Think of people who help others in a most proactive way. They are truly there for the other person. They plead their case, take on their cause, and go out of their way to help that

person live fully. That's how I see the Spirit helping us. The Spirit of God, though we not see this spirit, is in us and among us and invariably imparts Jesus to us.

During this great season of Easter we celebrate new life but not in some vague or esoteric sense. When we speak of new life or "practicing resurrection" we speak of the life that is caught up in Christ and committed to living life in the manner and likeness of Jesus. That is what we call baptism. Baptism is a big deal during the 50 day of Easter. That's why we've begun our service each Sunday in Easter with the Thanksgiving for Baptism and the water flowing into the font. We remember new life began for us when we were drenched in water, died to our old selves and rose again with Christ into a brand new way of living and that brand new way of living or wearing the daily garment as we talked about last week is really about living out the commands of Jesus to love each other and to love our neighbor.

When Madison, Gracie and Carter were baptized here at the Easter Vigil their parents and sponsor made promises to nurture them in the ways of Christ and did you notice how they responded: "Yes, with the help of God." That same night six adults renewed their baptismal vows and made promises and said the same thing: "Yes, with the help of God." Last Sunday, six young people affirmed their baptism and made promises to live the Christian life and said the same thing: "Yes, with the help of God." At all of these services we were asked, all of us, to support and pray for these newly baptized and newly confirmed persons and how did we respond?, "Yes, with the help of God."

Are you picking up on a theme here?

Loving others isn't something we do alone. Our baptismal vocation isn't a solo affair. And it does not depend upon our own strength or reason. Mutual love in the community of faith and the love we share with our neighbors comes as a most gracious gift from God. God gives us the help we need. The Spirit is our advocate and our helper. Love is no impossible demand or set of rules but the very manifestation of God's presence. Jesus commands us to love and through the Spirit gives us the wherewithal to love.

Now, this is a radical word in a society like ours that values the self-made or autonomous person. Sometimes we eschew help or think it's somehow a bad thing or even wince at the notion of asking for help. Small wonder. If you visit most book stores you'll see a large section called "Self-Help." Sometimes, I think, the human spirit is more attractive to us than the Holy Spirit!

But when we proclaim "Yes, with the help of God," we say something counter-cultural and something true. We are utterly dependant on God. And God helps us and fulfills God's promises in amazing ways. God helps us by giving us a community of believers to support us, to encourage us, to nudge us, to challenge us to provoke us, to comfort us. We help each other and God works powerfully in this manner. God helps us by giving us the gifts of Scripture so we may know the story of God's faithfulness and see and know again and again the way of love

marked by Jesus. God helps us by joining us to Christ and to each other at this Table each week we come here to celebrate the Resurrection.

Paul, in preaching to the folks at the Areopogaus in our first lesson today was quite impressed with their religious devotion and statuary but then he went on to proclaim the Resurrection by speaking of the particularity of Jesus who isn't confined to an altar but the very source of life itself ... as the one in whom we live and move and have our being. . Essentially he said that we need not grope for God for God has come to us. This is the love of God. God stepped into our humanity to help us. In fact, he knelt to wash our feet as a sign of what servant love is all about.

In reflecting on the foot washing that occurred here on Maundy Thursday many folks described how important it was for them to have their feet washed. Others talked about how important it was to wash another's feet. And it occurred to me, after that conversation, that this is what love looks like. It isn't one or the other. It is both helping and being helped.

And so we may freely and joyously help other and we may freely and joyously ask for help from others. I think that is what means to live humanly and to live in community and it is, may I say a very reflection of the holy trinity ... Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Each person of the trinity supporting one another and dwelling in mutual love.

When we have difficulty loving as Jesus commands or knowing how to love or even speaking of love, the good news is that we have Spirit promised by Jesus to who are our helper and our advocate. Sooner or later we see and know again and it is God's doing. I find the good news o this Easter Sunday morning to be that the Christ is risen among us to help us, to be our advocate, to be... thanks be to God! Amen.