

Easter 5, St Paul's Cathedral

1John 4:7-21

The gospel reading of the “vine and the branches” is a wonderful reading that talks about God abiding in us and we in him. The part of God that abides in us is his amazing love. It is “love” that I want to focus on today... because that’s what we’re about. We’re all about love. First, as I often do, I want to begin with a story.

The story concerns a congregation who had just called a new priest (maybe he was a Dean!). The whole congregation was excited about meeting their new priest and hearing him preach. On his first Sunday morning, the church was crowded... packed in like sardine (they’d come to check him out)... The people sat on the edge of their pews in anticipation of his first sermon. Sure enough, it was a doozy! He’d selected as his text, 1John 4:11, ‘Beloved, if God loved us in this way, we also ought to love one another’ (part of today’s reading). As the sermon ended, parishioners smiled, heads nodded, and the Parish Nominators breathed a huge sigh of relief. He was a keeper!

Then the following Sunday, as the new priest read the text for the day, a few of the old parishioners raised their eyebrows, because it was the same text as the Sunday before—1John 4:11, ‘Beloved, if God loved us in this way, we also ought to love one another.’ They’d never heard two consecutive sermons on the same text before, but, to give the new priest the benefit of the doubt they listened carefully and tried to be open-minded. But as the priest began his sermon, lo and behold, it was the exact same sermon, word for word, that they’d heard the week before.

They didn’t know what to make of it. ‘Was this some sort of joke?’ they wondered. Or maybe they were supposed to get some *deeper meaning* the second time around? Did he even know that he was repeating himself? Out of courtesy, they didn’t comment. They just listened politely and, when the service was over, shook hands at the door and said something like, ‘That was a very interesting sermon today, Vicar.’

The next Sunday, everyone was on tender-hooks. The tension was thick as the service began. One could sense that a storm was brewing. When the new bloke began the reading for the day, the congregation looked at each other and rolled their eyes, for, once again, they heard, ‘Beloved, if God loved us in this way, we also ought to love one another.’ And, to their horror and dismay, he began the sermon with the exact same words as the two Sundays before!

Before he could get past the introduction, one of the wardens jumped up and said, ‘Pardon me, Vicar, but we’ve heard this sermon twice now. What’s going on?’ The priest looked at the warden and said, ‘Well, nothing’s going on really. Just do this... Love one another and I’ll give you a different sermon next week!’*

* Story found on the net and adapted for today’s sermon.

‘Beloved, if God loved us in this way, we also ought to love one another.’ This is the heart and soul of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Again, this is what we’re all about. It’s what distinguishes us as Christians. In the words of the old song, ‘They’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love, yes, they’ll know we are Christians by our love.’ God loves us, and we, in turn, must love one another—this is the essence of the Christian faith. Yet, when you try to put love into *action*, it’s not quite as easy as it sounds; it’s a lot easier said than done.

Let’s be honest, sometimes we don’t feel very loving, and, just between you and me, some people are a lot easier to love than others.

This morning I wonder if we might look behind the command, to love one another as God loves us, in order that we might rediscover what is the source of love, and, in so doing, tap into the power of a love that is both encompassing of *all* those we meet and, which endures over the changing seasons of our lives. To get straight into the nitty-gritty of it, let’s begin with the first two verses of the 1 John reading for today, where John says,

*Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God;
and everyone who loves is born of God, and knows God.
The one who does not love, does not know God,
for God is love. (1John 4:7-8)*

This is our faith in a nutshell. The source of all love is God, for *God is love*.

It sounds so obvious, yet it’s not. Unconsciously, we humans believe that, somehow, the source of love is within us; that we mere humans have the capacity to love, separate and apart from God.

We all know that love is the subject of endless songs, movies and Mills and Boon novels—it’s the Young and the Restless, Days of our Lives and The Bold and the Beautiful... it’s ‘when a man loves a woman’ (just one of the many love songs of that nature). We talk about love of friends and family, love in terms of patriotism and love of country. Except for those of religious persuasion, those with faith, it’s as if God has nothing to do with it at all!

When you think about it, the word “love,” for us is a generic term that conjures up a variety of meanings and connotations. It can refer to a feeling powerful enough to cause us to do crazy things. It can just as easily refer to deep devotion to an individual or group that demands loyalty, fidelity, commitment and sacrifice (like the Collingwood Football Club). Love can be as fickle as a passing whim—as in, ‘I just love Macca’s Chai Latté’—or, it can be as enduring as life itself—as in, ‘Love divine, all loves excelling, joy of heaven to earth come down’.

In the last 15 verses of the Letter of John, the word “love” is mentioned 29 times! This is more than twice as many times than in any whole chapter in all of Scripture! John was really bringing home a point, wasn’t he?

Poets, writers and mystics through the ages have tried to express the meaning of love in countless ways. I remember the boxer, Jeff Fenech, once famously pronounced, 'I love youse all!' Very memorable! No, he wasn't one of those poets, writers or mystics of whom I spoke, who've tried to express the truth and beauty of love.

None have expressed love more eloquently than the Apostle Paul,

*Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.
It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful;
it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.
It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.
Love never ends.*

I'm often asked to read this passage in a wedding or funeral service. But, when I do, I like to point out the fact that, as much as we might like to think of love in this way, this is hardly descriptive of the human love we know. I believe our experience of human love is often anything but patient and kind. We, because of our humanity, are prone to jealousy when someone we love shows too much attention to someone else. We can't help boasting or puffing out our chests when we think we do something extraordinary, and, sad to say, many of us can be arrogant and rude when others fall short of our expectations. Most of us, from about age two on, want to do things our way, and we tend to get pretty irritable and resentful when we're forced into submission to others. And, we'd like to think that we genuinely wish the best for others, but, to be honest, we can't help but snigger, can we, when some big shot, smarty-pants gets what's coming to him?

All this is to say, there's a *big* difference between the love Paul describes to the Corinthians and the love we experience from day to day. How might we explain this? The answer is, I believe, that humanly speaking, we don't have the capacity to *really* love, separate and apart from God. We can feel infatuation, we can experience warm, fuzzy love, or even strong lustful feelings of passionate love; but, as for love—*genuine* love (*agapé* love)—that can only come from God. God is, in fact, the source of true love,

*the initiator of love,
the perfect example of love and
he is the creator of love.*

The Good News is, that when we place God at the centre of our lives, God's love fills *our* hearts and gives *us* the grace to love one another; not just in part and for the moment, but fully, intimately, completely, and for all time. Again as Paul suggests, only love 'bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.' Only love such as this lasts forever.

So, contrary to what the world would have us believe, the source of love is *not* within us; it's within the very being of God, for 'God is love, and he/she who remains in love remains in God, and God remains in him/her' (1John 4:16). Some would say a bit of an abstract statement of truth.

But, I should hasten to add, God's love is anything but abstract. Perhaps in literature, love is a concept, an ideal, a principal on which to base lofty philosophical notions. But, in the Christian faith, God's love is concrete and specific. In the words of our text today:

*By this God's love was revealed in us,
that God has sent his one and only Son into the world
that we might live through him.
In this is love,
not that we loved God, but that he loved us,
and sent his Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins. (1John 4:9-10)*

Fully understanding and acknowledging Jesus' death and resurrection is the starting place to a life of devotion to God and service to others. It is the source of our ability to love God, to love neighbour and to love self. Because God loved us so much that he sent his Son to die for us, we are free to live a life of gratitude to God and to share with others, the Good News of forgiveness and new life. The truth is, in a word, 'We love him, because he first loved us' (1John 4:19) and the tangible proof of God's love is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Again, God's love is anything but abstract. It is concrete and specific, and *this* is the way we are called to love one another. Not with gushy, lovey-dovey love and gooey feelings (granted that there is a place for this romantic love too) but with this *agapé* love of which both John and Paul speak; a love expressed more deeply, more spiritually and by action, through deeds of loving kindness.

The source of our love is God, and God's love is concrete and specific, first in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and repeated, over and over again in the way we live our lives and through deeds of loving kindness we're able to share with others in Christ's name.

'We love him, because he first loved us.' If we are faithful, our love is seen and expressed in countless ways. God is the source of all love, and the miracle is, the more love you give away, the more God gives you in return.

This is what I hope you take with you today: 1John 4:11, 'Beloved, if God loved us in this way, we also ought to love one another.' Do this, and maybe Dean John will give you another sermon next week! And, by the way ... 'I love youse all!!'

The Lord be with you.

Rev. Linda
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