

The only Love that Unifies

Preached on Trinity 1
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ
June 6, 2021
Text: 1st John 4: 7-21

In the Christian calendar, in the cycle of the Christian Year, the essential message of the Holy Scriptures is meant to feed us and enable our spiritual growth. As we follow the appointed lessons Sunday by Sunday, as we meditate upon them, as we open our minds and hearts to understand their meaning, we find ourselves led to a deeper and clearer perception of Christian truth, its power to save, and of what that means for our daily lives. Although we've heard these Scripture lessons over and over again, year after year, there is always something new in them—if we truly listen. If we humbly place ourselves under them, we will hear something which speaks freshly and sharply to our condition; something which illuminates our understanding; something which moves our wills; something which challenges the way we live our lives.

Today, on the First Sunday after Trinity, the Epistle lesson offers us a summary of what the Christian Year has been about up to this point. The message is very simple and direct: "in this was manifested the love of God towards us, that God sent his only-begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him." That really sums up all we have been celebrating throughout the first half of the Church Year, from Advent to Trinity Sunday: the showing forth of God's love in Jesus Christ. We have celebrated the love that takes our human nature, transforms it, and elevates it to a new spiritual life, making us children of God by adoption and grace. "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." In the words of one of our hymns:

O Love, how deep, how broad, how high
How passing thought and fantasy
That God, the Son of God, should take
Our mortal form for mortal's sake.

This, you see, has been the point of all our celebrations: that we should catch a glimpse of the manifest love of God, and be refreshed and elevated, "reborn," by that vision of what God, in Christ, has done.

For the natural man, God is the great unknown, the mysterious principle of all existence, which finds some sort of recognition in all the world's religions. To know God in that way, as the infinite power ruling the cosmos, is an ennobling. But to know God as love is something much more, and far different. To know that the eternal principle moving and governing all things is the divine love is a transforming knowledge. To know that God is love is to see everything with new eyes. It is to see "a new heaven and new earth." (Revelation 21.1) It is to be spiritually "reborn," as Jesus said to Nicodemus in last Sunday's Gospel lesson. (John 3.7) It is to be saved from fear and hopelessness.

Our recognition of God's infinite, all-encompassing love, is at the very heart of our salvation. "Hereby we know love, because he laid down his life for us." (1 John 3.16). In love, he gave himself for us. And it is our destiny and vocation to be transformed by that love, to realize it and fulfil it in our lives. That is St. John's second point in today's Epistle lesson: "Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another." That is our introduction to the long season of Sundays after Trinity. The Scripture lessons for today and for the following Sundays are to be a kind of education in the practice of Christian love. The love of God in us is manifest in our love for one another, in our active good will. It is love which is not just feeling or superficial emotion, not just "in word and in tongue"; but rather it is love which is "in deed and in truth." (1 John 3.18) Without that active good will, without the deeds of love, our love of God is clearly false: "if a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar."

The story of Lazarus and the rich man, in today's Gospel lesson, illustrates exactly that point. Why is the rich man in hell? It is not some arbitrary punishment visited upon him from outside; it is simply the description of a soul which has never loved others and is shrunken, parched, and tormented in Hell because he never sought the Living Water. As Dostoevski puts into the mouth of Father Zossima in *The Brothers Karamazov*, "What is Hell? I maintain that it is the suffering of those unable to love."

To love one another, in the sense in which the Scripture means it, is to will the eternal good of one another, and to act practically in terms of that will. It is not necessarily dependent on a feeling. It is something we choose to do. But how can we do it? Our own needs, affections and preferences, our own fears, keep getting in the way of it. So needful of good ourselves, and fearful of losing it, we can hardly see our neighbors' good and will it. But "perfect love," says St. John, "casteth out fear." The basis, the starting point, is God's love for us. "We have known and believed the love that God hath to us...Herein is our love made perfect." It is our knowledge of God's love for us that enables us to love, and to grow in our love for others. It is the knowledge that we are deeply loved, however unworthy we may be, which frees us from the domination of our own needs and fears. So we must grow in the knowledge of that love.

Finally, St. John speaks of love in terms of commandment; and that might seem a strange way of putting it. How can love be commanded? We're used to thinking of love as something spontaneous, something that somehow just happens: one "falls in love." What sense does it make to command it?

But St. John's approach is more realistic than conventional modern notions about the spontaneity of love. Our loves do not "just happen." They belong to a character formed by a long process of training and habit-making. And that process always begins with commandment and obedience. Just as our natural life begins with obedience to parents and teachers, so our life in Christ begins with our obedience to God's word. There is, certainly, a spiritual maturity, when our loves are spontaneously right. But that comes with a lot of practice and is the condition we call "sanctity" or holiness. Still, it must begin with our obedience to the Lord's commandment. "And this commandment have we from him, that he who loveth God love his brother also."

This is a love that we as Christians are meant to show to our brothers and sisters in Christ. It is also a love that the world should see and take notice of. The Church, at its best, offers a community and a vision of human flourishing that should stand as a challenge to all attempts at this by fallen humanity. The Church should be an anticipation of God's Kingdom, a Kingdom in which the people are united in love of a God whose worship is our ultimate, true, and lasting fulfillment.

All merely human attempts at unity only succeed if pursuing much less exalted ends. In the case of large political communities like democratic nation states, they hold together through a combination of laws and structures the people consider legitimate and a national narrative in which the populace believes. In more authoritarian states, this unity is maintained by the domination of a favored class, party, or ethnicity and the suppression of dissent through censorship, fear, and propaganda. Whatever sort of government a nation has, it can, at best, only aim for security and order, and serve as a support for a common culture. It cannot be the final end of humanity, nor is it meant to be. A political community is judged by the security it provides and the degree of human flourishing it allows. But it will always be one in which self-interest rules, love is limited, one group dominates, and the threat of violence is always just beneath the surface. St. Augustine called this "normal" way of ordering our lives together the "City of Man."

For a long time, the Church has accepted the role as adjunct to this reality. It does not see itself as training its membership to provide an alternative to the City of Man. It assumes that no other way of politically ordering a population is even conceivable until Christ returns. Meanwhile, the Church just stays in a holding pattern, waiting for the end of the world, justifying itself with well-worn theological rationales. "Human sin is just a fact; it is ineliminable. All we can do is manage history by bringing some order to a more basic chaos." In our current situation, the best the divided Church can hope for is an instrumental or advocacy role in the modern polity, serving the party most closely aligned with their understanding of Christianity. Most Christians cannot even imagine their values and understanding of God's will advancing other than through power politics—which always relies on violence in the end. Thus, they have let the City of Man set the rules.

But if the City of Man has the last word, then it is difficult to understand why we pray "Thy will be done, on *earth* as it is in heaven." If Christians believe that the human world cannot change, then don't we believe that the last 2,000 years of human history have been rather pointless, theologically speaking? What do all the struggles of the Christian faithful to bring the Gospel to the world mean if, in the end, nothing changes? If Christians believe that The City of Man is the only possible city in the human order, and the Second Coming puts an end to that order, then what has been the point of the Church's existence? It's absurd. All of those godly people, the saints and the martyrs, witnessing to the Kingdom and trying to bring it about seem to be the butt of a cosmic joke. Tragedy finally has the last word.

But the City of God, anticipated by the Church, reveals that this is not true. The City of Man is only a parody of the True City. Violence is not inevitable. Goodness is more basic in creation than sin. And true and deep unity between humans doesn't necessarily require force. For Christians believe a loving God can bring a *true* unity out of plurality. This can be achieved because the only *true* common good among people is found in God. Human kingdoms cannot achieve that; their unity depends on dubious narratives, self-interest, lies, delusions, fear, and violence. But Christ, as Paul says in Colossians, "disarmed the principalities and powers, and made a public example of them..." (2: 15) Hence, He revealed publicly that our belief in the inevitability of selfishness, enmity, and state violence is wrong. He made the sacrifice to end all sacrifice. Godly order does not rely on violence and the fear of death because Christ overcame death. His Kingdom is the true Kingdom, revealing all others as ridiculous caricatures. The City of God is one where our full humanity is finally fulfilled and violence is not necessary. The Church should produce people who behave as if the City of God is the only true city. This City tells the story Christians believe is true, that God in Christ through the Spirit has saved us from the tragedy of inevitable violence.

If the Church is really living up to God's purpose for it, its members, through their genuine love of God and each other, will be a witness to the inadequacy and falsity of all earthly kingdoms that aren't finally under God's righteous rule. It is to expanding the beautiful breadth and depth of this Kingdom that all followers of Christ are called.

In the Name...