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1 John 4:7-21, John 15:1-8
Loving in the Manner of God

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Whoever does not love does not know God, for God *is* love. (1 John 4:8, NRSV)

I think it is very charming the way things have worked out, that on Mother's Day, of all Sundays, we have St. John's discourse on love. For the love of a mother is often the best earthly example we have of God's love for us. As my wife Carol often says, whether in the forest or in the city, woe to the one who comes between a mother and her cub! And many of us have benefited from such fierce love. Not all of us have, but many of us have been blessed by mother's love. The love of a good mother is patient, forgiving, hoping for the children, praying for them, profligate in pouring out strength for the sake of the cubs, accepting of a kind of voluntary poverty on their behalf. Yes, the love of many of mother is Christlike, and those who have been blessed with such mothers have happy reason to celebrate Mother's day.

"Love is a sweet word, but sweeter the deed." So said St. Augustine in his commentary on our text. There is an inescapable practical component to love. It is not a mere wishing well toward others, but also an affection for others that breaks forth in good deeds toward them. It is as we read last Sunday in our reading from First John Chapter Three:

¹⁶We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us -- and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. ¹⁷How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? ¹⁸Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. (1 John 3:16-18, NRS)

St. James joins St. John in this emphasis on the practical. And so we read:

¹⁵If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, ¹⁶And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? ¹⁷Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone. (James 2:15-17, KJV)

Both of these apostles are simply echoing the teaching of our Lord Jesus, who said,

¹⁷Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit (Matthew 7:17, KJV)

Yea, it is the teaching of the one who commended the Good Samaritan not because the man wished well the man waylaid by robbers, but because he bound his wounds, set him on his own beast, and made provision for him at the inn.

I suspect that this theme is perfectly plausible to many of us. Love is a sweet word, but sweeter still the deed. We are to love not only in word, but also in deed.

Let's move on then to ponder what I take to be a sublime teaching, an idea capable of lifting us to new heights of love. I mean that we are to love *in the manner of God*. For that is what our text adds up to, I believe: we are to love one another in a divine way. We are love in a way that reflects God's love for us.

Check me to see whether my logic makes sense to you, or at least, that I have gotten right the drift of our text. In the first verse of our Epistle reading, we read the exhortation to love one another:

⁷Beloved, let us love one another...

That's plain enough.

Then immediately follows the apostolic teaching on the source of love:

⁷Beloved, let us love one another, because *love is from God*;

I take this to be the nature of true love: it the love that comes from God.

And the third step in the syllogism strengthens the idea that love is *from* God by teaching that God *is* love:

⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, for God *is* love.

This last teaching is radiant with wonder and hope: God *is* love. It is not simply that our God loves, nor that he loves a great deal, but that he *is* love. He is love in such a way that there is no remainder to him, no shadow of anger or petulance or indifference in him.

In the wee hours, then, if you should awaken with guilt or worry or discouragement, then try to bring this to mind: Your Maker bears you only good will, and if he should be angry, he is angry only at that which would harm you, for you are precious to him.

To return to my theme: Beloved, we are to love one another in the manner of God, for love - true love - comes from God who is wholly, entirely love.

The question then is, what is God's love like? What is the nature of divine love, that we too should pursue it? As near as I can figure it, to love *as God loves* is to love the past, the present, and the future of the other person. For our God is triune, and loves completely -- not just now, loving what is seen, but also loving the hope our neighbor represented when he or she was young, and loving that person as he or she is yet to be when that person is sanctified.

So, let's try our hand at imagining love like that.

We believe in one God in three persons. We believe that we are loved profoundly by the joint love of the three divine persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

How, then, does God the Father love? Well, the Father loves us by calling us into being. He bids us into reality. He declares the world, and reality leaps into obedience: Let there be light! Let there be a separation between the waters and the land. Let there be creatures by the multitude inhabiting earth, sky, and waters. And let there be *you* (with each of us substituting our own names)! He called each of us into existence, and in calling us, he called us with great hope.

Not only did he call you, but he also called that one who is so very frustrating for you now, perhaps even heartbreaking, perhaps even an enemy.

Therefore, we should try to rethink our stance toward those who frustrate us and to be more kind-hearted toward them, for they started off good, and hope of that goodness remains in them.

“But Preacher,” you might be inclined to say. “I know that I am supposed to love my neighbor, to love my doggone husband, to love my enemy. But I’m telling you: that man is bad, bad to the bone!”

To which God the Father would gently remind you that you are wrong, that he or she is not bad to the bone. For at the end of the day, when God rested from his labors, he looked upon your neighbor, your husband, your wife, and your enemy and gave that great judgment, “He is good. She is good.” It is as the Bible says:

³¹And God saw *every thing* that he had made, and, behold, it was very good.(Genesis 1:31, KJV)

And so to the one who in great frustration says, “But preacher, my man is bad to the bone!” God the Father answers, “No, sister, he is not so bad as that. At one time I looked at him and smiled with satisfaction: he is very good! I hope for that still.”

Seek to love, then, as God loves, remembering or imaging this frustrating one back when he was young, back when she was more innocent, more gangly and naive. Try to imagine your enemies as they were when they were little, when they were close to mother and father, when they maybe went to Sunday School and sang children’s song. Remember them when their life was full of promise, before it went so bad. And hope for the return of that original goodness.

So, that is the first point: love your neighbor not just for what you see before you now, but also for the hope that person represented when they were young.

Now, let’s move ahead to the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The love of the Holy Spirit manifests itself in labors on behalf of the *future* of your neighbor. In the language of classical theology, the Holy Spirit loves by way of “sanctification.” That is, the Third Person of the Holy Trinity labors to bring to fulfillment the hope at the beginning of things. The Spirit works to make us better than we are at present. Indeed, the Spirit works to make us holy.

Therefore, that frustrating person standing before you now is not yet done. His story is not complete. Her story is not yet finished. Try to love her, then, not just for what she is now, but also for what she is on her way to being.

Love, I say, the future of your enemy. He or she does indeed have a future, for that is the special ministry of God the Holy Spirit: to perfect and to sanctify the sinner. So do not imagine that your enemy is implacable and unchangeable. Do not imagine

that he or she can never be better than they already are. Love them for the promise of their future. Indeed love in hope of living together in heaven forever.

Love them with a transforming love: a love that pulls them along toward their high destiny. For such is the wonder and power of love, that it can lift upward the beloved. It can take a sinner and make him a saint. It can take a loser and make him a winner. With words, with caresses, with chastisement, with exhortation, love your neighbor so as to help that neighbor along toward holiness of life. Try to love as the Spirit does, striving and yearning for that better person God intends that one to be.

But chiefly, love them even now in the manner of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. He is the Saviour. His ministry is to *save*. His ministry is to reconcile the hope at the beginning of things with the perfection of that hope at the end. His love aims to keep us alive, so that the hope at the beginning does not fall short of the perfection at the end. He is the Saviour. He contends against sin, death, and devil and against all those forces that seek to destroy us and to prevent us from reaching our destiny.

And Jesus is the one who pays the price that we might live to see another day.

That is how mother's love is so Christlike, for mother often pays a price that the children might grow up and onward toward their destiny. Look at her. Sometimes she is haggard, sometimes she is worried, sometimes she is at her wits end trying to take care of you. There is joy in loving you, much joy! But also there is a cost, and she bears it for you, with her strength, with her tears, with her prayers.

Her love mirrors that of Jesus who said,

⁴⁴But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; (Matthew 5:44, KJV)

Her love mirrors that of Jesus who died on the cross that we might have life everlasting.

¹¹Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. (1 John 4:11, NRSV)

“We also ought to love one another,” says our text. Indeed, let us seek to love one another in the very manner of God, in this threefold way that loves as does God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, to whom belongs the glory, now and forever. Amen.