

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως: Easter 6-B (9 May 2021)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

The Rev. Todd Foster

Time-stamp: <2021-05-08 Sat 14:14>

Collect

O God, you have prepared for those who love you such good things as surpass our understanding: Pour into our hearts such love towards you, that we, loving you in all things and above all things, may obtain your promises, which exceed all that we can desire; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

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

1 As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you

“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.”¹

In nomine patris...

What an evocative beginning to our Gospel lesson today: “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.” Let’s set aside for a moment the use of the term “Father” on a day on which we like to honor the mothers in our lives. Our lesson starts off here by drawing a comparison. Jesus tells his disciples, and tells us through his disciples, that God the Father loves God the Son in a particular, powerful, perfect way. And the love of Jesus for each of us is just the same kind of love: it is likewise individual, intense, and infinite. It’s not too hard for most of us to think about the Creator and the Christ being close: they’re practically but not quite the same person in that strange, unfathomable form of existence that we call God. Sometimes we represent the trinity as three beings seated around a common table, as in Rublev’s famous icon. And on Rublev’s icon, some people think the fourth side of the table use to have a mirror stuck to it so that we, as we viewed the icon, would see ourselves reflected in it, seated at the table in community with God. That’s what Jesus is saying: that perfect love which exists in the community of God, is the perfect love which Jesus has extended to us, so that we might be included in that community. Jesus’ invitation, then, is not to earn God’s love or to become worthy of God’s love or even to receive God’s love. Jesus declares that we are already loved by God in just the way that God loves God’s self. The invitation of Jesus is simply to *abide* in God’s love.

¹John 15.9 NRSV

2 Abide in my love

This is where our Gospel reading gets a little tricky. Because the first thing I think of when I read it is, “Wait! Is Jesus saying that God’s love is conditional? That doesn’t sound like the Gospel that was handed down to me!” It’s not hard to encounter churches and Christians who seem to see God’s love as conditional, contingent, dependent upon my own faithfulness or sinlessness or some other measure of purity that I’m never really going to be able to be confident about. But listen closely to what Jesus says. “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love.”² Jesus’ love is fixed and firm, just as the Father’s love for Jesus is fixed and firm. God’s love for us is a characteristic of God’s nature, not a function of our obedience. God’s love was offered to you and me before we were born, and also at the deepest moments of sin and sorrow, despair and disobedience, tears and trespasses of our lives. God’s love is the constant, even more sure than the shining sun, and longer lasting, too. The invitation here is to abide.

To abide means to live someplace: we sometimes use another form of the word to refer to a house, an abode. This is a place we habitually inhabit, where we rest and eat and care for ourselves and our families. This is the place we can let our guard down and think creatively, use our imaginations, and take chances in our words and actions, confident of the love and acceptance of those around us. And for all the imperfections of our earthly abodes, the difficulties that come up in our imperfect families, home for most of us is a place of safety and well-being. Lack of a safe, supportive home is a crushing disability, with dire physical, emotional, and mental consequences. Yet all of us at times have chosen to leave homes, generally in order to form new ones, but occasionally for lesser reasons, and with fewer resources to cope.

Sometimes we leave home for good and important reasons. Children leave home to make a new home in a college campus community, or with a partner or a spouse, or perhaps just because it is time for them to make a life on their own. Some of the earliest Christians even chose to leave their homes and societies in order to embark upon a great adventure of utter dependence upon God, living in the desert.

Sometimes we leave home for more ambiguous but no less necessary reasons. Families sometimes fall apart, with someone or some ones moving out because the pain and the dysfunction of living together has become too great, and there seems to be little hope of recovering the relationship around which the family once formed.

Sometimes an abode is abandoned for tragic reasons. Substance abuse and addiction often cause rifts in relationship and perhaps even necessitate a separation so as not to enable self-destructive behavior of someone we love and in order to protect the well-being of those who are endangered by the behaviors of the one suffering from addiction.

Whenever homes break apart, for good reasons and especially for tragic ones, there is mourning, second-guessing, and a desire for restoration. This is true of mothers and fathers lamenting their children’s absence, and this is especially true of God’s love for us. Even a parent who has been manipulated, deceived, stolen from, and threatened still longs to receive their child back into their heart. Even God who is ignored, whose gifts are taken for granted, and whose incarnate Son is crucified, longs to embrace us once again, the very people who find ourselves addicted to sin and stuck in cycles of destructive, hurtful behavior toward God, toward one another and toward ourselves.

God’s love is that unchanging abode, the home that is always waiting for us, always ready to receive us. So the invitation of Jesus is not about how we get there and qualify for God’s love. It is rather, how we can avoid walking away from God’s love, avoid rejecting the relationship God offers, avoid absenting ourselves from God’s

²John 15.10 NRSV

presence. The way we do that, says Jesus, is by loving one another. We love each other the way that Jesus loves us, which is the same way that love exists in the Triune community we call God. Thus we are joined to that divine community by our love for one another.

3 Fruit that will abide

To be a disciple of Jesus, to follow Jesus' example, to experience the love of God, is all bound up with our love for one another. Loving one another isn't always easy. Since today we celebrate mothers' day, I invite you to call up a mothering presence in your life and ask her or him, "Is it ever difficult to love the way that you do? Does it ever hurt?" It's the nature of love to hurt for one another, to sacrifice oneself for one another, to lay down one's own life, in ways small and large. This is why the Bible, and Jesus himself, sometimes describes God's love as of a mother, in order to indicate the deep tenderness and passionate care God has for all God's children. And it is precisely when we love our way through the hurt, as Jesus did on the cross, that we will discover a new blossoming of resurrection life on the other side.

This is why we gather as church. We do so in order to learn to love each other as Jesus loved us. Because in that way we will participate in and experience the very love of God for us. As we grow in that love, learning to share it in ever-widening circles with our neighbors far and near, familiar and foreign, we will discover that the Kingdom of God has come very near indeed. And that, friends, is the goal. A new home, a perfect abode, in which to abide forever, in wholeness and love.

Amen.