

Sunday, May 9, 2021
Sixth Sunday of Easter (Year B)

John 15.9-17

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/467874864520709>

(Sermon begins at about 19:10)

“Abide in My Love”

Earlier this week, I had a conversation with a parishioner about the confusing nature of some of our Gospel readings this time of year. Specifically, the fact that we are in Eastertide, but the Gospel readings in the last half of the Easter season—after we exhaust the post-resurrection appearances about three weeks in—are actually from Holy Week. In some ways, this sets up a bit of a disconnect. Seven weeks ago, we did Holy Week, with Jesus’ Passion. Then we celebrated Easter. And now we are back to Holy Week, at least in our readings, with selections from Jesus’ Farewell Discourse—his final words to his disciples before his crucifixion.

Although, truth be told, the words that we hear Jesus speak, while originally delivered during Holy Week, are timeless. They are not bound by the context of what is going on in the calendar. They are not even particularly bound by the context in which they were originally spoken. They are words that transcend our chronological marking of time and point to some of the central truths of our faith. And with Easter being the primary celebration of our faith, these words, regardless of when Jesus spoke them, convey what is behind the Easter event in the first place—what was behind Jesus’ death and Resurrection. Words that transcend even the Easter event and convey central truths about the entirety of salvation history. Words that encapsulate and explain all that we read in Scripture. From the beginning of Creation through the tumultuous events of the Old Testament. Moving from ups and downs of the Old Testament stories into what we know as the New Testament with the birth of Jesus in fulfillment of ancient prophecies, through his earthly ministry, culminating in his death on Good Friday and his Resurrection on Easter. And even beyond to the expansion of the church to incorporate Gentiles, spreading across the globe and through the succeeding two millennia, to you and me. Jesus’ words in our Gospel readings this time of the year summarize just what all of this has been about, just why all of this happened—and why it happened the way it did. Out of love. God’s love for humanity. God’s love for you. God’s love for me.

Our Epistle for today is from another of the writings of John the Evangelist: the First Letter of John. Earlier in the First Letter of John (not part of today’s reading), John succinctly writes, “God is love.” He then goes on to say: “God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might love through him” (1 Jn 4.8-9). God demonstrates his love for us through the Incarnation. God demonstrates his love for us through the death and Resurrection of his Only Son. This is what Jesus speaks to in our Gospel reading for today. But before we go there, I want to step back for a moment and look at salvation history prior to the Incarnation.

As Christians, our faith, our experience of God, is solidly rooted in the New Testament. In the story of the Incarnation. In the story of Jesus' life and ministry. In the story of his Passion and Resurrection. For these are the events and the experiences that define our faith and define who we are. But we need to remember that all of this is built on the foundation of the Jewish tradition, the story of which is told through the Hebrew Scriptures—what we commonly refer to as the Old Testament.

One of the things that I often hear expressed is discomfort with the God of the Old Testament. The common perception is that the God of the Old Testament is a vengeful God focused on punishing the people for their sins. People much prefer the God we worship. The God of the New Testament. The God who, as we are talking today, is all about love. There is often confusion about why God is one way in the Old Testament and another way in the New Testament. Confusion about how God could have changed. Why God would have changed. And while God is generally viewed as being one way in the Old Testament and another in the New Testament, what we need to remember is that God has not really changed. We have. Our experience of God has changed. What we choose to focus on in our relationship with God has changed.

In its simplest form, the Bible—Old and New Testaments combined—is the story of humanity's relationship with God. And like any relationship, it has changed over time. We need to remember that the Scriptures were written by humans as a means of conveying their understanding of God and of humanity's relationship with God. The writers of the Old Testament had a far more distant relationship with God. One that was based on fear. Not that God sought to instill fear. But that was just how people viewed the Almighty. As distant. As demanding. As vengeful when we messed up. And we messed up a lot. But the reality is, if you look closely at the Old Testament, God is not really that vengeful—well, after you get through that whole thing about wiping out the world with a flood. Oh, sure, God is portrayed as vengeful even after that. But that is not really a fair characterization. That is really just human perception, how the writers of the Old Testament characterized God. The outgrowth of a time when everything was attributed to God. An enemy came in and defeated the people or carried them away into exile? God must be angry. A disease wiped out a large part of the population? God must be angry. A storm destroys a village? God must be angry. Perspectives that we do not take today because we have a more evolved and sophisticated understanding of God and of our relationship with God.

If you look at the story of the Old Testament—take a close, critical look—you will see that it is all about God seeking to be in relationship with us. God said he would kill Adam and Eve if they ate of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But he didn't, because he loved them and instead chose to forgive them for breaking the one law he established; because he wanted to be in relationship with them. God saved Noah and his family, a remnant of humanity, because of his love for them and a desire to continue in relationship; because of the hope that things would turn around and be different than before the Flood. God brought the people out of Egypt because he loved them and wanted to see them thrive. Nearly all the stories where God is characterized as vengeful can be reframed to reflect God's desire for relationship. Sure, there were moments when God had to punish the people for egregious acts against God's laws. But it was always measured. And very quickly, God would forgive them and invite them back

into relationship. Not that they were ever out of relationship. But that was often the perception of the people—of those who recorded the story.

In short, the Old Testament was about God seeking to be in relationship with us; things going well for about five minutes before we blew it; God taking corrective actions—tough love; us repenting and returning to God; God forgiving us and welcoming us back; repeat. Until we get to the New Testament. God realized that the only way he could really demonstrate his love—to demonstrate just how much he loves and cares for us—was to come and be with us in the flesh. Hence the Incarnation. Hence the New Testament. The testament to a rebooted relationship between God and humanity.

Which brings us to the Gospel for today. How does Jesus begin today's Gospel reading? "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you" (Jn 15.9). Jesus is attempting to shape our understanding of love. The love of which God is the source. The love that God is. Here Jesus makes a statement that he is a conduit for God's love. That God's love flows through Jesus to us. Although this side of the Resurrection we recognize that Jesus is God Incarnate, God in the flesh. So, for us it's not so much that Jesus loves us because God loves Jesus. Rather, we recognized that in Jesus being God Incarnate, Jesus' love for us IS God's love for us. That if Jesus is God and God is love, then Jesus himself is love. Through the Incarnation, Jesus becomes the pure embodiment of love. And certainly through his death and Resurrection, which is the ultimate demonstration of love, and through which Jesus becomes the pure embodiment of love. The pure embodiment of God's love for us.

Jesus goes on to say, "Abide in my love" (Jn 15.9b). Abide. In other words, accept my love. Live in my love. Live out of my love. Allow my love to support you, strengthen you, sustain you. This implies a far deeper meaning of love than friendship. This is a deep, intimate love unlike any other. More profound, more intimate than even the love between spouses, than the love between family members. This is a love that gives us our identity. This is a love that makes us who we are at our very core. This is the love of the One the author of the Acts of the Apostles characterizes as "In him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17.28a).

Jesus then goes on to give an indication of how we are to respond to that love. "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love" (Jn 15.10). That we show our acceptance of Christ's love, of God's love. That we show that we live out of that place of God's deep and abiding love by responding in kind. By keeping God's commandments, which are, at their root, always about love. Love of God and love of others. That is the summation of the commandments. The commandments themselves are about love. About living into God's love. About allowing God's love to become a part of who we are. About spreading that love and sharing it with others. About us becoming conduits of God's love, just as Jesus is a conduit of God's love. About us embodying love just as Jesus is the embodiment of God's love.

Jesus then tells the disciples the "why" of all this. The why of Creation. The why of the Incarnation. Even the why of his Passion and Resurrection. "I have said these things to you so that . . . your joy may be complete" (Jn 15.11). That we might see and experience God's love firsthand. That we might experience God's love in a tangible way. And in experiencing that love, to experience the supreme joy of relationship with God. That was all God wanted from the very

beginning of Creation. It took the fits and starts of the Old Testament to get there. It took the Incarnation to get there. It even took the death and Resurrection of God's only Son to get there. But we finally did get there.

And then comes what I consider to be the best part of Jesus' discussion of love. "You did not choose me but I chose you" (Jn 15.16a). How awesome is that? How humbling? That Jesus, that God, chose you. That Jesus, that God, wants to love you. That Jesus, that God, wants to be in relationship—deep, abiding, intimate relationship—with you.

You want to know what salvation history—from the moment of Creation to this moment right here, right now—has been about? God loving you. Wanting to abide with you and to have you abide in him. God wanting you to experience the joy of being in relationship with him. God choosing you as his beloved.

Alleluia, Christ is Risen!

The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!