

Sunday, May 5, 2024
Sixth Sunday of Easter (Year B)

1 John 5.1-6; John 15.9-17

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/410890361714659>

(Sermon begins at about 5:45)

“Abide in My Love”

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

One of the benefits of us now livestreaming our Sunday worship services is that, even when I am not here, such as last Sunday, I can still keep tabs on what is going on in my absence. At least, at the 10:15 worship service. I particularly enjoy listening to the supply priest’s sermons. Most priest do not have the opportunity to hear their colleagues preach, so it is nice to hear different voices and sermon styles. Besides, I have to make sure Fr. Gary is not filling you all with heretical ideas.

In his sermon last week, Fr. Gary started off with a string of one-liners about love, primarily from the Epistle reading from the First Letter of John. He went on to talk about how such one-liners, along with other aspects of our church experience, such as our liturgy, are formational for our lives of faith. How, over time, these hopefully become ingrained in us, hopefully become part of our identity, and hopefully provide us with words to live by. That is, after all, why we do what we do in this place.

As Fr. Gary was going through his litany of one-liners, it brought to mind a story Jim Lemler, the dean of my seminary, told on himself in one of his sermons. I know I’ve told this story before, but it connects beautifully with Fr. Gary’s sermon last week and our Epistle and Gospel readings for today. Prior to becoming dean of Seabury-Western, Jim had been a parish priest. One Sunday, a woman dropped her young boy—probably about six years old—at church for Sunday School and the worship service. Why she did not stay is anyone’s guess. At any rate, she came back to pick-up her son after Eucharist, and asked him, “So, what did Fr. Jim preach about today?” The son replied, “oh, the usual. Blah, blah, blah, love. Blah, blah, blah, love.”

While I don’t remember much else about the sermon Dean Lemler was preaching to us seminary students, his point was that the Gospel really comes down to one thing. Love. This is a theme that Jesus repeatedly sought to drive home in his teachings and in his actions. This was the focus of his life and ministry. Just consider what he declares to be the greatest commandment: “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Mt 22.37-39). So, it’s not surprising that in our Gospel for today he focuses on this theme of love. After all, our Gospel for today is a portion of his Farewell Discourse, delivered to his disciples at the Last Supper. A lengthy speech that is a recap of what he had taught them, of what is important as they move on in their lives and

ministries after he is gone. So it is logical that a substantial portion of this discourse would be devoted to the topic of love.

Today's Gospel passage is the continuation of the Gospel from last week, where Jesus uses the imagery of himself as the true vine and we are the branches. Of how the branches draw life and bear fruit because of their connection to the vine. Of how we, as those who are the Body of Christ in the world draw life and bear fruit because of our direct connection to Christ. In today's reading, Jesus seeks to go deeper, explaining just what it is that provides for this life and growth.

Now, I'm sure you all recall your high school biology. That plants have a circulatory system comprised of the phloem and xylem—the plant equivalent of veins—which transport water and life-giving nutrients throughout the plant, providing what is needed for growth to occur. Only, in the vine and branch image that Jesus seeks to apply to us, that which provides life and growth is not water and nutrients, but rather is love. Love that flows through our veins and our very being, providing for our lives of faith, providing for our growth into who God has called and created us to be, becoming a part of who we are as members of the Body of Christ.

To emphasize the life-giving nature of this love, to emphasize the magnitude of this love, Jesus equates it to the love he has with God, with his Father. "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love." Abide in my love. He wants us to have that same deep, intimate relationship with him and with God that he has with God. According to our understanding of Jesus, he is not just the Son of God, he IS God in substance and nature, in addition to being human. As noted in the portion of First Letter of John we heard last week, "God IS love" (1 Jn 4.16b). Which means the love between Jesus and God is an integral part who they are. Love is an inextricable part of their very being. This is the love that Jesus tells his disciples, and us, that we are to abide in. The love that is to abide in us. This divine love that is to become a part of our very being.

Jesus is inviting us into the very same intimacy, into the very same depth of relationship, that he and God share. So that we may share in the same joy he has in his relationship with God. So that, in that joy, our relationship with Jesus and with God, so that our lives as members of the Body of Christ, will be made complete. Of course, the question becomes, just how do we do that? It's easy for Jesus to say "abide in my love," for him to say "abide in God's love." That is an inherent part of who he is and of his relationship with God. But we need a little more to go on.

Which he is more than happy to provide: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." Nothing new here. He's said it before. He has embodied this love for others throughout his life and ministry. Providing a model for his disciples and all who follow him to know what that looks like. Now, he is inviting us, commanding us, to do likewise. To seek to embody love for others. As I said, this is not a new teaching. For the disciples or for us. We already know this. Jesus is just reminding us of the essentials.

As Jesus says earlier, "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love." And by extension, "you will abide in God's love." In this, I don't think Jesus is saying that if you follow the commandment to love, you will miraculously find love. You will miraculously develop the

ability to love. You can't make a person love by commanding them to do so. We don't think of love as something you can make happen, like flipping a switch. Rather, love is something that develops naturally, organically, often inexplicably. In our human experience, the whys and wherefores of love are mysterious and beyond our understanding. What makes Jesus think he can just command us to love and it will happen?

The key is in his use of the term "abide," which implies a deep, ingrained sense of being. By framing love in this way, Jesus is actually reminding us that his love, that God's love, is already part of who we are. Remember the creation story. We are told "God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them" (Gen 1.27a). When it says we are created in the image of God, it does not mean that we are created to physically look like God. It means that we are created with the same essential qualities and characteristics as God. And what is God? Love. That is the core essence of who God is. All else flows from and out of God being love. So, if we are made in the image and likeness of God, love is also at the core of who we are as human beings.

Jesus' commandment to love one another is merely a reminder of who we are as those made in God's image. It is a reminder of our core essence. It is a reminder of what is already within us. It is a reminder of who we are. Perhaps this is what John is getting at in his first letter when he writes "his commandments are not burdensome, for whatever is born of God conquers the world." The command to love one another is not burdensome because we already have the capacity, the ability, to do so. The commandment to love is not so much a directive as it is a gentle—and loving—reminder that in all we do, we are to operate out of the divine love that is within us. That we are to seek to build up our neighbors in love, to build up ourselves in love, and to build up the world in love.

This is a reminder that we are to continually seek to find ways to tap into the love that already abides in us, to find ways to embody that in our day-to-day lives. Perhaps easier said than done. Continually seeking to live the commandment to love one another is like exercise. It takes practice. The more we practice, the better we get at it. The more it becomes an ingrained habit. The more it becomes a way of living and being. We already have glimpses of what that looks like in our own lives. Just think about those in your own life whom you love. Particularly those whom you love—or have loved—so deeply, beyond our ability to describe. And that deep love that we feel in our own relationships is but a shadow, a fraction, of the divine love that abides in our inmost being.

Jesus tells us we are to "go and bear fruit, fruit that will last." To bear fruit is to do works of love. Tapping into that vast source of divine love that abides within us by virtue of us being made in the image and likeness of God. The divine love that abides at the core of our being by virtue of us being members of the Body of Christ. It won't happen overnight. But with practice, as we continue to be faithful in keeping God's commandments and abiding in his love, we will be able to go deeper into that source of his love, drawing what we need, allowing us to share more and more of that love. Allowing us to embody God's love in the world.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!
The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!