

Easter 5, Yr. B

April 29, 2018

Acts 8:26-40; 1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8

Given the fact that the word “love” appears 27 times in 14 verses in the passage we heard from the first letter of John, it won’t surprise you that that’s what I think we should talk about this morning. The word “abide” appears often in John’s Gospel and so I think we should talk about that one, too. Let’s start with love. God is love, John tells us – not power, not a rule-enforcer, but LOVE. Robert Coles worked with children and wrote a number of books about them, including one about their spirituality. In that book, he tells about a little boy who said that he thought God was really about power – he said that if God came here, He would impress upon everyone that God was very, very great and He would make everyone believe in Him and if anyone refused to do so, he’d die....One can only hope that this little fellow will mature in his belief. But, even so, there’s probably a part of each of us that maybe also wishes the God was about power, so He could smite the bad guys and straighten everything out. Nope, says John. God is LOVE.

Sounds great, doesn’t it? But I think that we can be pretty confused about love, actually. Our culture tells us that LOVE means romantic love. And that’s certainly one kind of love. You may remember that the Greeks named different kinds of love: there was Eros, which was about desire, and Philia, which was about friendship and then Agape love, which is what John is talking about here. Sometime ago, I said that someone had shared a scheme about love with me and that one went like this: first it’s “if you love me, you’ll do what I want.” And then it’s “if you love me and I do what you want, you’ll do what I want.” But finally, it’s more like this agape love: I will do whatever is best for you, helping you to become the person God intended you to be. You’ll notice the movement away from ME. Agape love is disinterested, not in the sense that the lover isn’t interested in the beloved, but because the lover doesn’t care if there’s any pay-back. It doesn’t have to be reciprocal. That’s how God loves us – not because we’re so delightful and lovable, but just because. He created us; he loves us. John says that we only know how to love because God loved us first.

In the Old Testament, the word used is often *hesed*. It’s sometimes translated as loving-kindness, sometimes as mercy, but it also shades into righteousness – into recognizing our responsibilities to the various people in our lives and acting accordingly. And you’ll note that here it’s relationship, or connection that matters. So a king would have the responsibility to rule justly and fairly; his subjects would have the responsibility of obedience and support. Parents and children would have *hesed* responsibilities to one another. Employers and employees. You get the picture, I’m sure. An interesting aside here. When we’re told to love our enemies, that’s the word that’s used. In her book, *Fields of Blood*, Karen Armstrong points out that that usage comes from treaties in which former enemies, now making peace, agree to honor the terms of the treaty, to be trustworthy and to offer practical help whenever that was needed. She points out that that kind of love is within everyone’s reach, and it’s far from our notions of liking someone, or feeling good about them. In all of these senses, unlike the romantic idea, it’s often

duty that matters, and that kind of hesed love can hold families together, and keep communities in peace.

In John's letter, he says that we can't love God and hate our brothers and sisters. Perhaps it's easier to love God because that can be rather abstract (it shouldn't be, but we can make it that way!) Our brothers and sisters, however, are right here with us and sometimes they're standing on our toes, or they're in our way. How hard it can be to love then!

So, how do we do that? First, as I said, we recognize that that kind of love isn't about warm, fuzzy feelings and is sometimes grindingly hard. But then I think we have to remind ourselves that each of those people has that divine breath of God within them and that God holds them in love just as he does us. And there's another recognition: that we're not separate. Whether we're thinking of Paul's idea of the Body of Christ, or the English poet John Donne who so memorably said that "No man is an island, no man stands alone." Or even if we listen to modern science which has changed its model since the days of Isaac Newton. For centuries, the model was about being separate. Reality was made up of discrete parts, with atoms being the basic building blocks. Newton taught that the solar system worked like a vast machine, made up of parts, with each part being distinctive, individual and SEPARATE. You are you and I am I. When this model is applied to the human universe, we end up with individual humans as those basic building blocks, all a bit like a clock – something breaks down, you isolate that part and fix it. But now particle physics is saying that the whole thing is less like a clock and more like a web – there is no such thing as an individual apart from his or her relationships. The vision now is one of undivided wholeness, with each part affecting the others. Connection.

And here we can hear John's gospel about the vine and the branches. Two thousand years before Einstein and his colleagues, John had this insight. Connection to Christ and to one another is life. It's maybe a bit flippant, but when you were small, did you go to the Saturday afternoon movies (I think they were like 12 cents). Often there was a Tarzan movie – and the takeaway from those was that you needed to HANG ON TO THE VINE. John's saying the same. The vine, which is Christ, is where we get our sustenance, our vision, our energy, our ability to do what's being asked of us. Again, it's about recognizing, acknowledging and living in connection.

And that's another thing that sounds easy, but really isn't. We have to be intentional about it. I lived in Seattle for a while and at a church meeting, there was a speaker who lived on the street. He talked about all the people who walked right by him, as if he was invisible. And he made a plea – PLEASE SEE ME. You don't have to give me anything, but please see me. See me as a person like you. Recognize that we are brothers and sisters of the same Father. With that in mind, think back to the Acts story we heard. I must confess that a first, and shallow reading, leaves me thinking that Philip must have trained as a marathon runner. I don't know how fast chariots go, but he not only managed to keep up, but was able to hear what the Ethiopian was reading. The story can be read as one of mutual recognition of connection. Philip is there, running alongside, and asks the Ethiopian if he understands what he's reading. And that's followed by an act of hospitality, with the Ethiopian inviting Philip into the chariot for conversation. Philip explains the reading and then tells how he was himself affected by knowing

Jesus. And then comes that wonderful part – as they pass some water, there's the question, "What's to keep me from being baptized?" If you think about it, that question is about relationship: WHAT'S TO KEEP ME FROM JOINING THE COMMUNITY OF THOSE WHO FOLLOW JESUS? WHAT'S TO KEEP ME FROM BECOMING A MEMBER OF THE BODY OF CHRIST? Commentators today point out that there were MANY things: he was a different race, from a different culture, had a different sexuality. But to Philip's everlasting credit, none of that stood in the way. The Ethiopian was baptized and then, the text says, went on his way rejoicing.

Connection, relationship, really seeing one another, being present to one another, valuing one another, or quite simply LOVING one another.

While I was preparing this sermon, I ran across a wonderful story which illustrates this power of seeing and connecting. The story goes that a young mother had recently died and, following the funeral, the father was trying to put their little boy to bed. But the boy kept asking, "Daddy, where is Mommy? When is she coming back?" After a lot of attempts to satisfy his son, the father picked him up and took him to his own room and put the little one in bed with him. At one point, the little boy reached out his hand through the darkness and placed it on his father's face, asking, "Daddy, is your face toward me?" When he was assured that it was, he said, "If your face is toward me, I think I can go to sleep."

God's face is always turned towards us. He sees us, knows us, and holds us in love. And God asks us to do the same thing – is your face turned toward your brothers and sisters? Amen.