

Sermon 6 Easter Year A
April 27, 2008
St. John's Episcopal Church
The Mariann Edgar Budde

If You Love Me

Jesus said to his disciples, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him or knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will not longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."

John 14:15-21

Last Saturday evening on the radio show, *A Prairie Home Companion*, the head of the All Guy Shoe Band, Rich Dwarksy, sang two songs in Hebrew in honor of Passover. One was an achingly beautiful love song to God called *Adir Hu*. The second was called, *Dayeinu*, which in Hebrew means, "It would have been sufficient." The verses are words of praise, Dwarksy said, for all that God has done for the people of Israel, ending with each refrain, "Dayeinu," "It would have been sufficient." "If you, O God, had *only* rescued us from Egypt and brought us out of slavery, it would have been sufficient, but then you sustained us in the wilderness, and that would have been sufficient, but then you gave us the Torah, and that would have been sufficient, but then you gave us the Sabbath, and that would have been sufficient." Just one of your blessings, O God, would have been enough to warrant all our thanks and love. To the song, Dwarksy said, we can all add our words of thanks for the particular blessings of our life—O God, if you had only given us music, that would have been sufficient; if you had only given us the beauty of Creation, that would have been sufficient; if you had only given us the people who love us and whom we love...it would have been enough, more than enough for us to love you in return.

"If you love me," Jesus said. "If you love me." Every once in awhile it happens: we feel within us a love directed toward God. In response to beauty or in gratitude for the gift of life, our hearts fill with love for God, the source of all that has been lavishly bestowed. It can happen in response to heartache, too. We feel our own pain and the pain of others, or we ponder the perplexity of the world's many sorrows and injustices, and for once we find ourselves not railing against God or using injustice as an excuse to disengage, but simply holding the pain with a curious mix of both grief and gratitude, sadness and love, not only for ourselves and others, but also for God.

"If you love me"—it's not an ultimatum. It's a question. Do you love me? What if that's what God hopes for, more than anything, that we approach God, not with fear or guilt, not with a sense of obligation or duty, but with love?

"If you love me," Jesus said. If we love him, to the degree that we love him, then what? What response does such love evoke? The prophet Micah responded in this way: "What, then, does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Jesus said, "If you love, me, you will keep my commandments." Coming from anyone else, such a statement would be problematic. But

remember that Jesus' commandments are defined by love: *Love one another as I have loved you. Love God with all your heart, mind and strength, and your neighbor as yourself. Love your enemies. Whatsoever you do for the least of my brothers and sisters, you do for me. Treat to the sick and wounded that you meet on the roadside as if they were members of your own family.* The way we express our love for God is in our love for others.

But here's the rub: how *well* we love, God or anyone else, depends on our capacity to love. And the capacity to love must be cultivated, for love without intentional effort, discipline, and inner maturity, no matter how sincere or heartfelt, can't weather much and doesn't last long. We know this. The only way to cultivate love is to practice being a loving person.

I'd like to briefly underscore the three primary arenas in which we are called upon to love as Jesus loves, and to say a few words about each one. You know these arenas well: love of self; love of those in our immediate circles of relationship, both family and neighbor, friend and enemy; and love of others—those whose lives we need to make an intentional effort to think about, much less love, and whom we love best through collective efforts to create a more just society and sustainable world.

As an example of the importance of self love, let me describe for you a scene from August Wilson's play, *Gem of the Ocean*, now playing at the Guthrie Theatre. One of the characters is young black man named Citizen Barlow. The time is 1904. Citizen has come to Pittsburgh from Alabama, and he arrives at the home of a wise old woman named Aunt Ester, whom he heard has the power to wash souls clean. Citizen is about as empty and as lost as a man can be. He's carrying around inside him the guilt of watching an innocent man die for what he did.

Citizen immediately takes notice of a young woman living in Aunt Ester's house named Mary, and he makes a feeble attempt to seduce her. But Mary's been through the routine too many times with too many men who didn't know anything about love. She lists them all by name for him: "LeRoy. And John and Cujoe. And Sam. And Robert. One after the other they come and they go," she tells him. "You can't hold on to none of them. They slip right through your hands. They use you up; they all the time taking till it's gone. They taking 'cause they need. You can't blame them for that. They so full of their needs they can't see you"¹

If we do not tend to that emptiness inside us, the burdens we carry and the wounds we've sustained, our efforts to love others, even in the name of God, will falter. At best, we simply run out of steam and collapse. At worst, we inflict our emptiness on others in varying degrees of inconsideration and violence, or ask that others fill it for us. Jesus invites us to know and love ourselves, to offer the same love and concern that he offers us, to be, in the words of Ann LaMott, "militantly and maternally on our own side." Doing so isn't at all selfish; for with such love, we build within us the capacity to love others.

Regarding love for others—those within our immediate circles of concern and relationship—let me simply remind us all of the importance of basic decency, the small acts of kindness, and the conscious, daily effort to seek good for other people, regardless of how we may feel at a given moment. The practice of love in our immediate realm of relationship has very little to do with how we feel. Love is expressed through our

¹ August Wilson, *Gem of the Ocean* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2007), 44.

conscious choice to act with kindness and mercy, to make the extra effort to reach out in concern, and most difficult of all, to refrain from gossip and resentful speech, the mindless cruelty we inflict on one another with our tongue.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu was in the Twin Cities last month, and he said to a group of high school students in North Minneapolis what he says to everyone: God doesn't ask us to like every person—that would be impossible. But God commands us to love each person, to actively seek the good for others. No one who works at being a loving person would deny that this is hard work. It requires practice and perseverance. But those who know something about love will tell us, a commitment to live with good will and forgiveness toward others “is the only real foundation of healthy and lasting relationships.”²

Finally, a word about loving God through works of justice. Marcus Borg writes in one of his books that compassion and justice are what God cares about most of all, which makes sense if, in fact, God's love extends to all people. Loving God, then, will inevitably engage us in God's passion, working to change the structures that privilege some and cause suffering for others. Works of compassion are of course important to God, as a means to assist those who suffer. Justice, however, asks *why* so many of God's children suffer, and then seeks to address the causes, not the symptoms, of human pain.³

It is becoming increasingly clear to all of us that this is a pivotal moment for the human species, and for the planet which is our home. Many voices from many realms are saying with rising urgency that time is running out for us to make the changes we need to make to prevent even greater global disasters and human suffering than we are already witnessing. In our own communities a similar call is sounding: there is urgent need for change in almost every sector of the way our society is organized. It can all seem so overwhelming. But it is also true that more and more people are responding to the call, and many with a deep spiritual conviction. There are literally thousands of grassroots efforts to help save the planet from ecological disaster, address the global food crisis, the needs for investment in basic human needs, both internationally and in our own communities. Being part of the solution, being part of the movements to avert what one Christian writer has called our path of societal suicide, is arguably one of the most compelling ways to express our love for God.

One way to do this is to spend time in relationship with people immediately adversely affected by extreme poverty and other injustices, so that they don't remain abstractions that we are free to consider or lay down as our time allows. We need relationships to help us cross over into a personal and loving concern for those whom God also loves.

But out of love for God, we also need to become political, in the broad sense of being aware of the ways collective power creates the structures in which we live and how through collective power can change those structures. William Sloane Coffin, for decades an amazing preacher and Christian activist, said it this way: “What we Christians need to realize is that to love effectively we must act collectively, and in that collective action personal relationships cannot ignore power relationships. Until Christians learn this truth,

² The Monks of New Skete, *In the Spirit of Happiness* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1999), 242.

³ Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: How We Can Be Passionate Believers Today* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), 200-204.

we shall be in this world as lap dogs trying to keep up with the wolf pack.”⁴ Justice is a riskier, more costly path of loving God than any of the others I have mentioned. Self love, kindness toward our neighbors, and works of charity rarely offend anyone. A passion for justice almost always offends someone.⁵

How we engage in the work of justice, as in the work of loving in all other realms, will depend on who we are and what our lives ask of us at a given moment. We can’t do everything. We can’t carry the weight of the world on our shoulders alone, yet God asks us to do our part. Some have likened the work of justice to a group of women coming together to make a patchwork quilt. None of us is responsible for the whole quilt; the important thing is for each of us to do our patch.

“Do you love me?” Jesus asks. “If you love me, then practice love. Practice doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly on this earth, with me, the One who loves you.”

⁴ William Sloane Coffin, *Credo* (Louisville: Westminster Press, 2004), 23.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 201.