

Sermon 2 Easter Year A  
March 30, 2008  
St. John's Episcopal Church  
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## Unconditional Love

*When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the authorities, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you. After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told them, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt, but believe. Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written, so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.*

John 20:19-31

Much of life, for good or ill, is conditional. Most relationships are conditional, dependent on the satisfaction of those involved. Wealth is conditional, and increasingly detached from traditional factors of hard work, education, and work performance. Prestige and self worth are conditional, dependent on whatever criteria we use or allow others to use to assess our lives. Small wonder we have difficulty imagining the unconditional love of God. There is little evidence of such love elsewhere.

I am most aware of conditions and ultimatums on the periphery of my life, in the places and relationships where I have little commitment and where others have little commitment to me. I am, in general, quicker to judge strangers than I am life-long friends. I am, in general, less offended by the foibles of those I love than I am of those more distant to me. A good indicator of the maturity and health of a relationship might be how quickly we assume negative motives for another person's actions, and how quickly we use another person's actions to justify our pulling out of the relationship. When stress or anxiety is high, we tend to assume the worst of even the smallest slights; conversely when stress is low and the atmosphere more trusting, we have more room to be generous in our response to inconvenience or hurt.

It's not that placing conditions or expressing an ultimatum is, in itself, a bad thing. It's good to be clear about our standards for relationship and commitment, and to know that some things are, in fact, non-negotiable. Such is the work of self-definition: learning where we stand, what we believe, what separates us from others, and what we're looking for in relationship to others. But it's also true that sometimes we use our conditions and standards to avoid making commitments or to justify our withdrawal. For clearly in relationship to certain people and things we value, our conditions change and our standards relax.

Think back on a time when you were consciously choosing something that mattered to you. Indeed, perhaps you are in the midst of such a decision now. It could have been or could be now anything at all: which school to attend or job to pursue; whether or not to persist in a given relationship; what town or neighborhood to live in; which church to attend or join. One way—a good way—to go about such a choice is to make a list of the things are important, what it is that you're looking for and value. Then when weighing among options, you measure those choices against your list, selecting the one that meets most, if not all, of what you want or feel you need.

Sometimes it actually works out that way, that we choose the best of various possibilities according to our listed criteria. Other times, though, something else happens to sway our decision. That, too, could be anything—a feeling, an intuition, a sense of call, even, that bypasses logic and moves us in a given direction.

However, we make our decision, what matters most is what happens *afterwards*, as we live into the decisions we've made. For rarely, if ever, do the people, places and opportunities we choose fulfill all our expectations. Often we are disappointed, and we must struggle with what to do next. Do our disappointments mean that we should question our decision and undo it? Or is there something for us to learn about ourselves and our expectations? Either way, how we change and learn in the dance between hope and disappointment, anticipation and reality, principles and relationships, expectations and acceptance is the real work of life. And through all these experiences, God invites to consider that *unconditional* love is like. Unconditional love is love without strings, without preconditions. Unconditional love is less an exchange—giving and receiving equal parts for mutual satisfaction—and more as gift that comes to us from another place and that we are called upon to share. Unconditional love is a choice that we make.

These dynamics are in play not only in our relationships to one another, but also in our relationship to God. From our side, we can get lost in abstractions, in the *idea* of having a relationship with God. To that idea we bring our conditions and criteria. I once sat with a neighbor who genuinely longed to be part of a spiritual community and to tend to her spiritual life, but she couldn't get past all the things about religion that she despised as a child. She actually made a list and we went through it together, all that she refused to accept. I listened, suggested a book or two that she might read, and then asked her to consider devoting a small amount of time each day or week to pursue her spiritual quest. She could spend that time anyway she felt would best serve her. The most important thing, I said, was that she find a way to move past all that she couldn't accept to discover what God might have to say to her from the other side of the line she was drawing in the sand and daring God to cross. Eventually she might find a faith community to join, but I doubted she would even find one that would meet her criteria if she went into that search armed with all the things that she was poised to reject.

Let me hasten to say that I don't think conditions are bad things to have in relationship to God. Think of Thomas, the hero of today's resurrection story. His ultimatum wasn't mean-spirited or selfish. He simply said that for him, faith was too important to base on hearsay. He needed to know for himself that what the others said was true. Thomas' example raises the excellent question: what do we need in order to believe? What do we need to know or work through before we can give our hearts to God?

I don't know if it's possible to give our hearts to an idea. For us to commit our hearts, we need some kind of experience, something that moves us. In that regard, Thomas is exactly right. We need to know for ourselves something of God's unconditional love. We need God to come to us, from God's side, and while we can be open to that experience, we can't make the divine/human encounter happen through our will power or on our own terms. God doesn't work that way. Sometimes we need to live in the space between our assumptions about God and God's self-disclosure. In the space we wait, as Thomas waited, and as my neighbor waited, for some kind of experience to sustain us.

When those experiences of God come, mediated through community or solitude, nature or art, love or friendship, our conditions for belief may soften. When we are touched by grace, however we define grace, it becomes less important to have all the answers and the proof we'd like. With experience, we're less undone by the long stretches of emptiness that are part of the spiritual path. There comes a time, finally, when conditions and ultimatums give way and we stop asking God to conform to our needs. We become curious about the nature of God apart from our assumptions, and we can allow our experiences to be what they are, no longer judged by some previously held standard.

In the course of the morning, we will baptize four children. We will make promises on their behalf, fairly weighty ones, actually. But baptism is foremost a sign of God's unconditional love, a love without ultimatum or condition. It is a promise that God will be God with and for these children as they grow. It isn't difficult to look into the eyes of a child and know that God loves him or her without condition. But we can we imagine that same love for ourselves, and to live, in earnest, as if it were true? I invite you to consider that possibility, to rise this morning and say to yourself, "I am loved by God unconditionally, prized by God for who I am," allowing the possibility of such love to get through. To the degree that we know ourselves as unconditionally loved, we can offer such to others. To the degree that we don't, we will remain in the economy of exchange, seeking mutual satisfaction. There's nothing wrong with loving that way; it's where we all begin. But it isn't the way of God.

I close with another story about love, also from the Gospel of John. At one point in his ministry, Jesus began to say hard and controversial things, angering not only his enemies but also many of his followers. After one particularly dispiriting day when, according to John, "many of Jesus' disciples turned back and no longer went about with him," Jesus asked the twelve, "And what about you? Do you also wish to go away?" Simon Peter, speaking for the group, answered, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life." (John 6:66-69). They had come too far to turn back. They were beyond whatever personal that brought them to Jesus, past the need for him to live up to their expectations. They simply loved him for who he was.

At some point in every relationship we are in, including our relationship to God, we will reach those moments of choice: do we also wish to go away? Only then do we know not only who the other is for us, but who we are for them. Only then do we know not only who God is for us; but who we are for God.