

Sermon for 10/23/11
Pentecost 19 Proper 25A

I have experienced the love of God.
I've known God's love more deeply in many different ways: during prayer, while gazing out at the sea, in unexpected coincidences or realizations, in receiving communion, through my family, and even when reading the newspaper.
Just last year I experienced the love of God through many of you.
You may recall that my mother died last year after suffering from Alzheimer's Disease for quite some time. While her death came as a relief from years of suffering, it was still difficult for me to deal with.
And, as is normal in grief, I've had numerous moments during the past year when I've felt that grief particularly severely.
God has helped me through this time in many different ways.
But, quite clearly, God helped me through you.
The members of Trinity Church reached out to me again and again: through cards, letters, phone calls, donations, expressions of condolence while shaking hands at the door or when running into each other at the grocery store. I experienced your care and concern as a very real expression of God's love for me and it helped me through part of my grief.

Today's Gospel gives us the Summary of the Law: love God and love your neighbor as yourself.
Jesus was asked which one of all the many religious laws in the Old Testament was the most important. His response was powerful: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind; and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.
It was a simple summary that gave guidance for how we're supposed to live.
Its focus on love reminds us to be concerned with more than ourselves; our love is to extend to God and to other people.

So, it's clear that we're supposed to love.
The difficult question lies in trying to figure out *how* we're supposed to love God and our neighbor.
You can't love either of them just by sitting around and thinking about it.
No, in this case "love" is quite clearly an action verb.
For example, reflecting on how much I love my kids may be a pleasant way to spend a few minutes, but unless that love had spilled over into my doing my best to provide for them – giving them food, clothing, shelter, and direction – then it would be just about meaningless.
And while I can celebrate my love for God through prayer, unless that love results in action, it is also meaningless.
What kind of actions show our love of God?
Easy: loving God's people is the best way to show our love of God.

Here's one way that works: obviously our relationship – between you and me – is based on our relationships with God.
Without having been called to be the rector of Trinity I never would have come to live in Fredericksburg and we wouldn't have come to know each other in the first place.
Since our relationship is based on the presence of God in our lives, the things that we do for each other are clearly part of God's love.
The love that you showed me following my mother's death was an expression of God's love at the same time; I experienced the love of God through you while you lived out your love of God and your love of neighbor by caring for me.

Are you with me so far?
Do you see how you can live out your love for God through loving other people?
Of course, that brings us to the next question: what does loving our neighbor look like?
That's when we turn to scripture to find some answers; when we make the choice to start caring about the things that the Bible tells us God cares about, that's when we start putting our love of God into action.

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For example, have you ever visited someone in prison or in jail?
Trust me, it's not a very enjoyable experience; no one *wants* to spend time there.
But the Bible tells us to visit people in prison; it's one of the ways that we're called to love our neighbors.
The members of the Brotherhood of St. Andrew have had some conversations about this particular demand of Scripture.
We may not ever begin such a ministry, but we're trying to pay attention to how God is calling us to love our neighbors.

Some people love being around little kids; others would prefer that children be born at least 25 years old.
Jesus taught us to be welcoming to little children; it's an important value even for people who don't want to be around children.
Here at Trinity we've responded to that call with Sunday School, the child-friendly 9:15 Eucharist, and some of the social activities that we offer for children.

Who among us really wants to give our money away?
Wouldn't we rather be able to keep it all for ourselves?
In particular, isn't it easy to resent giving money to people who are not as productive, as capable, or as experienced as we are?
But the call of scripture couldn't be any clearer; we are to reach out in concern for the poor, the homeless, and the hungry.
Trinity's Tuesday Night Outreach, our participation in Micah Ecumenical Ministries, and our support of El Hogar are ways that we respond to that call to care for the people who have less than we do.

Are you beginning to sense a theme here?
Loving God and loving our neighbor means sacrificing some of our own wants and desires so that we can do what God calls us to do.
Living out the love that we are called to show requires a sacrifice on our parts.
And that just makes sense, doesn't it?
After all, the most powerful expression of love ever was when Jesus Christ loved us enough to die on the cross for our sake.
His love for us was so powerful that he was willing to die so that we might know the fullness of that love.
And here's the good news: just as Jesus' self-sacrifice on the cross won for us redemption and new life, our loving sacrifices are transforming as well.
When we actively try to live into the call to love God and our neighbor we become more loving people.
We become the people we're supposed to be.
We become the people that God created us to be.
Our struggles to be more loving unite us to Jesus' suffering on the cross *and* to his victory over sin and death.
May the love of God inflame each of our hearts and souls and minds so that the whole world may be wrapped in love.

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