

23 October 2011 St Michaels Studio City
a pe 25
Matthew 22.37-39

Love

Several years ago someone observed to me, and I could not quite tell if it was a complaint or an compliment, that I almost always preached on love. I was somewhat surprised, as I hadn't been aware of that myself. I reflected for a couple of days and asked some of my parish's folks and discovered that indeed what my friend had said was true: I almost always preach on love. I didn't quite know what to make of this discovery. On the one hand I didn't want to be the kind of priest who has only one sermon, repeated endlessly until the church is blessed with his retirement. On the other, I remembered one of my preaching professors in seminary saying that the good news of the gospel was infinitely rich, too much so for one person to comprehend it all, and that one invariably found one or two themes that informed almost everything that one would say. He said that a theme for a preacher was all right, as long as it revealed a facet of the infinite possibilities of our life with God and was not just the same old sermon dressed in different clothing. I'm still not exactly sure where I fall in this, boring repetition or unifying theme, but I have found that love is the thing that interests me most, in life, in spirituality, and in theology.

Why that would be I'm not quite sure. Perhaps because I have been the victim, as we all have, of a lot of bogus love, that is, selfishness masquerading as love. Perhaps it is because I am just very needy when it comes to being loved. Perhaps I'm just a very good example of the theologians' understanding that the primary way in which we humans are the image of God is in our loving, the love we receive and the love we give. I like to think that I have taken to heart several great passages of the Bible, most of them the words of Jesus. Today's reading is one of those: the greatest commandment is to love God; the second greatest commandment is to love our companions; the third greatest commandment is to love oneself (Matthew 22.37-39). Then there's the time when Jesus says that He gives His followers only one commandment: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." And the last one is that magnificent statement in the first of John's letters: "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God,...for God is love." (1 John 4.7-8)

What it comes down to, I guess, is that love seems to me to be the most important thing in the universe, whether we are contemplating the nature of God, which is love, or reflecting on the direction and energies of our own lives, which ought to be love, at least the way that Jesus sees things. What is the purpose of life? To learn how to love, so that we can live in heaven, in eternal life, where we are bathed constantly in the golden light of God's basic energy, love. How do we go about learning to love? By throwing ourselves into the midst of the effort, loving with as much strength as we can muster in ourselves and by inviting God to enable us by Her own strength to love even more. In other words, we use our own talents of love, however large or small they might be, and we trust to God's grace, to use church language, to take us to

that level of loving we could never accomplish on our own. As we love in increasing degree, we become more like God, more holy, more capable of living in true joy, here and hereafter.

Love doesn't create itself. It can come only from love. We can love only after we have experienced being loved by someone else. That's why loving parents, loving families, loving partners, and loving friends are so important. It is from this love that we are made whole or complete and enabled to give love back out of ourselves. The tragedy, of course, is that many of us have been failed by these important people in our lives. They who had a duty to love us have failed in that duty. That makes our ability to love more difficult – not impossible, just more difficult. The reason that it's not impossible is that the most humanly unloved person in the world is absolutely adored by God. God loves you and me and every human being passionately, just because we exist. In that same letter of John that we read from earlier, we hear this: "In this is [real] love, not that we loved God but that he loved us..." (4.10) If we can just catch a vision of that love and trust it, we are on our way to a successful life, a loving life, a loving eternal life. Forgiveness of those who have failed us can release us from their stultifying power, can free us from *their* failure, not our own.

Love is complex, as befits the most important energy in the universe. There are lots of different kinds of love: love for God, love for romantic partners, love for children, love for parents, love for friends, love for nation, love for beauty, love for life, love for the helpless and needy, even, when we get really good at it, love for the unlovely and hateful – the list is endless. Each of these is love and yet each is distinct from the others. Sometimes there is emotional attraction and sometimes not; emotion is not the heart of love but rather something else.

That something else, the one characteristic that all loves share, the one way we can tell real love from fraudulent love, is this: real love always wants the best for the beloved. Does the lover want and work for the benefit of the beloved? If not, the claimed love is phony, a tissue of words, not true and honest. And we then need to protect ourselves from the disloyalty of such a spurious love. We need to distance ourselves, we need to forgive, and we need to forget.

But always we must commit ourselves to real love. It is the elemental force of the universe, the very nature of God, the essence of being human, the way to be Christian, followers of the Christ who said, "Love one another as I have loved you; love God, and love your neighbor as you love your self."