

Easter V

May 10, 2009

“Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another...By this we know that we abide in him, and he in us.” This week and next week, we hear from the First Letter of John and from St. John’s Gospel. They both have all sorts of interesting things to say about love, and the importance of love for the Christian and the Christian community. I want to start with this fascinating section from the Epistle.

“Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another...By this we know that we abide in him, and he in us.” Think about that; it’s an amazing statement. John is saying that if we want to know where we stand with God, there is really only one place we need to look; and it’s not where we usually think it is. The place to look to find out how we stand with God is not what religious experiences we’ve had; it’s not how we feel about things, (not even how we feel *deep down inside*); it’s not what we have suffered; it’s not what we have learned; it’s not even what we believe or how we feel about God. Instead, the place to look is whether we love one another.

This is a wonderful expression of an odd truth of the Christian life, one that the Church has always known but often neglected. It’s this: The way we check up on our spiritual life, on our relationship with God, the way we find out how well or poorly we are doing here, is not by looking first or primarily at our spiritual stuff—at our prayers, or at our spiritual and religious experiences, least of all at our feelings. Instead, the way we check up on our spiritual life by looking at our morality, at our relationships. Our spirituality is ‘working’, whatever that means, if we are sinning less. If we are not sinning less, then we have a problem with our spirituality.

Often, this seems like a dirty trick. It doesn’t seem fair that the heart of our spirituality should be so intimately connected to the way we respond to a bunch of people we accidentally end up living with or going to church with. Still, this is what John is talking about.

Think about it, if loving one another means anything at all, if it refers to any real people at all, then it must be talking about, at the very least and at the very first, our families—our families at home and wherever, (or whatever people are closest to us. Family is a pretty fluid term these days, and when I use it today, I'm talking not only about our immediate and extended families, but also about those people who are our inner circle, the ones we find ourselves dealing with the most,) so, in that sense, our families, and our parish family (and there may be others).

To be sure, these words about love mean a lot more than this, a whole lot more; but they cannot mean any less than this and mean anything at all. After all, it is almost always easier to love *everybody*, to love humanity, than it is to love *anybody* in particular, and especially those who are closest to us. (Remember, whenever the Bible talks about love, it's not talking about how we feel; it's talking about what we choose, and what we do—a bit more on this next week.)

It turns out that there are some institutions, and through them some people, that God puts into our lives primarily so that we will have to learn how to love them, and so discover what love really is—whether we want to or not. These “schools of love” include, at the very least, the family and the church. And notice just one of the things these two have in common: They both bring us into very important, and very deep, relationships with people we otherwise, quite likely, would have absolutely nothing to do with.

And the main reason they do this is not to insure that we will always enjoy ourselves; but, instead, to help us grow, to help us become more than we would otherwise be.

This can be a refreshing perspective, and can put a different look on things.

After all, we tend to expect the people of our lives to be there to keep us comfortable, and to meet whatever needs we think we have right now. So whenever that doesn't happen, we feel justified in leaving.

But the primary people in our lives are not given to us to make us constantly satisfied. Instead, God has given us each other mainly to drag us, sometimes kicking and screaming, deeper into the life of love and service that he knows is what we truly need the most. God has given us one another in order that we may become better than we are now.

If we take a look at our families, and at our parish, we will almost always find all sorts of variety and not a few surprises. In part, (and in both) we will not infrequently find exactly the people we would choose if we were choosing. At the same time, in part, (and in both) we will also find people we most certainly would not choose if we were choosing. What's more, if we look at the people we thought we were choosing, like our spouses, we discover that the person we are living with is, perhaps to understate the matter a bit, not precisely the same person we imagined he or she would be when the choosing happened.

The fact is, the people who constitute at least these two vital parts of our lives are gifts from God to help us abide in him, and he in us. Some of the business of living all of this out is supposed to be delightful; but some of it is supposed to be really complex.

Living in these schools of love can, and should, draw from us the very best we have to offer. (Also, since it is so important, and since it does involve such a level of depth, all of this can also draw the very worst from us as well. The stakes are very high.)

This stands in stark opposition the current cultural fantasy that says that if a relationship is meant to be, it will be easy, and simple, and natural—and if it isn't, well, then leave where you are and keep looking until you find one that is.

That's absurd. Certainly, there are tragic times when relationships become so destructive that they must be abandoned—but there are always hard times when people try to live together in a relationship of love. It's supposed to be that way. After all, God isn't finished with any of us yet—and there is that cross.

In a very real sense, God has just thrown us all together, willy-nilly, and said that it is *here*, with *these* folks, these relatives, these friends, these people who just show up, it is with these that we are to learn to love—so deal with it.

But there is another piece of that as well. You see, I also suspect that one of the main things these 'schools of love' also do is that they give us some concrete and invaluable practice for living in the kingdom of God. Remember, God has created us to live eternally both with him and with a vast and surprising assortment of folks that God has called together and *we* have not chosen. So, we might as well start getting used to that sort of thing now.

In any event, I offer you this way of looking at many of the people in our lives. Perhaps they are gifts to us from God, but not as we usually count gifts. Perhaps they are here, not to please us or to do what we want them to do; but for another reason. Perhaps they are simply brethren, and are placed before us for us to love, and for that loving to help us grow, and to give us some practice for life in the Kingdom of God.

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