

A Sermon for Easter 6, Year B
May 28, 2006
Fr. Jim Cook

Love: The tie that binds.

After church one Sunday morning, a parishioner who could find fault in almost anything, complimented the rector on his sermon. "I'm so glad you preached a historical sermon this morning," the parishioner said. The rector, shocked by this unusual praise, thanked the man. However, and apparently *not* being able to leave well-enough alone, the man continued, "Yes, because I'm sick and tired of hearing you preach about love all the time."

I imagine that it must be really hard to be a Christian, and particularly an Episcopalian, if you're someone who has a problem with the "love thing." In fact, if that is your problem, today would have been a good morning to stay home, because two of our readings this morning chock-full of references to love. But there's more to these readings than simply love, and I'd like us to find out what that might be.

In the gospel, which takes place after his resurrection, Jesus is looking ahead to his ascension. He's looking ahead to a time when he would no longer be a visible, bodily presence among those who follow him. Knowing that it would be a difficult time for his followers, Jesus leaves them some final, parting gifts.

But Jesus had been giving his followers gifts all along.

Baptism was one of those gifts. Baptism is the promise and reminder to us that we are God's adopted children. Baptism, however, is not a personal gift. Rather, Baptism is God's gift that sets us in a community called the Body of Christ, or the Church. It's a good plan, but the problem with communities is that they can get to fighting about things like: Who should be baptized? How do we baptize people? By sprinkling water on them, or by immersing them? And what does Baptism ultimately mean?

Another gift that Jesus gave us was Holy Communion. It's a very simple thing: We eat bread, we drink wine, and we recognize that it is the Lord. And like Baptism, Communion is not a personal gift, but a communal meal. And when we receive Communion, we're just like those two disciples who unknowingly walked with Jesus on the road to Emmaus. They didn't recognize him until they broke bread together. When we share the bread and wine of Communion, our eyes are opened to see Jesus; but we see him in each other! Holy Communion is one of God's gifts to the community, to strengthen the community. But the problem with communities is that they can get to fighting over things like who should be able to receive Communion, or what sort of wine should be used, or about how is Jesus present in that sacrament.

The Bible is God's gift to us. Through it, God speaks to us through the lives and words of the writers, and through the people about whom they wrote. Though the words of scripture can edify us as individuals, it is for the community that God has given this gift, so that the community can

know how to live together as the people of God. But you know how communities can get to fighting over the Bible: Which version or translation is the best? How do we interpret it? And who has the authority to interpret it?

Jesus also gave us the gift of the Church, the community of faith. The church is not a building; rather, it is “the blessed company of all faithful people” (BCP 339). And the task of the church is to help her members so order their lives that they are constantly moving not only towards God but also towards each other. But you know how communities can get to fighting over the church. Who should be allowed to join us? What happens when we have disagreements within our membership? How do we choose leaders?

Now, there are lots of other gifts that we’ve been given by God that I won’t mention here, but I think I’ve made my point: Whenever you have a community, you’re going to have problems and issues that arise from time to time. Jesus knew that, and that’s why he gave us the gift we heard about in today’s gospel: love.

I’m not talking about the emotion, the feeling, we call “love.” I’m talking about what St. Paul described in 1st Corinthians 13:

⁴ Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

What Paul is describing here would be better described as a lifestyle, and it’s what the King James translation of this passage described as “charity.” Charity is a word that seems to have fallen out of favor, at least as far as this passage is concerned, but I think it still has its uses. Because, in order for the community of faith to function as God intended, her members need to regard each other with no small amount of Christian charity.

I have learned throughout my life, and especially in the seventeen years I’ve been working in parishes, is that the quality of people’s relationships is a function of the quality of their interior, and spiritual, life. And we get a hint of this relationship when we read how Jesus said that we are to “love your neighbor as yourself.” And I have seen how, when someone has a hard time loving his neighbor, it’s often (not always, but often) because he has a hard time loving himself. Our inner lives and our outer lives are connected, and when one is amiss the other will almost certainly be as well.

If this is true, then how do our inner lives get squared away in the first place? The foundation of our inner life is established by our parents when we are very young, and then by our peers when we’re older. But as history has demonstrated, and as many of us know from personal experience, our inner lives can get pretty messed up, and for any number of reasons. Therefore, God stands ready, through his Holy Spirit, to help us get through the process of healing our inner lives; of

coming to that place where we can believe that we are loved and lovable, and valued and valuable. And how that process works can vary with each person.

For example, it took me years of prayer and Bible study, of hearing the stories that others told, and of trying to come to some sort of rational conclusion. But in time, I came to the knowledge and assurance that God loved me, and accepted me, and valued me.

My wife, Peggy, would probably tell you that her assurance of God's love and acceptance for her came after a long night of anguished prayer and supplication, and tears.

But sometimes it happens simply because you've been a part of a community that has embraced you and accepted you unconditionally. And pretty soon, you start thinking: "These people know me. They know what sort of life I've lived. They know the problems I've had. And they still love and accept me." And, when they come to the place where they know that they are loved and accepted by others, then they can begin to venture into the realm of believing that they are loved by God as well. And then, they've begun the journey to healing their inner lives.

God has been in the business of giving us gifts, and he's given us lots of gifts over the centuries. But the most important gift is love: his love for us, and our capacity to have love and charity for each other. It is this gift which enables all the other gifts to bear fruit. And this gift is given to us, even as individuals, within the context of the community, and it is the gift which holds the community together.

You may find yourself sometimes getting tired of hearing sermons about love. But I can assure you that God never tires of telling us how much he loves us, and accepts us. And we should strive to never tire of acting in love and charity towards one another.

Let us pray: O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son; Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that, in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.