A Sermon: ‘Lois Lane’s Lament’

John 15:9-17

9 [Jesus said,] “Just as the Father loves me,
and because of this love,
so do I love you.
Remain in my love.
10 You will remain in my love
if you keep what I have asked you to do,
just as I remain in my Father’s love
because I have done
what my Father has asked of me.
11 And I have done this so that my joy might be in you
and you might be filled with joy.
12 This is what I ask of you:
Love one another in the manner that I love you.
13 [And to what extent?] There is no greater love
than to lay down one’s life for the beloved.
14 And you are my beloved when you do as I ask of you.
15 I no longer call you servants or slaves,
because the servant or slave
doesn’t know what the lord is doing, or why.
But you, I call my beloved,
because I have made known to you
all that I have heard from my Father.
16 You didn’t choose me, I chose you
and I appointed you to bear the fruit [of love],
fruit that will remain for you,
so that whatever [that is loving that]you ask of the Father in my name
will be given to you.
17 This is what I ask and expect of you: that you love one another.

— Translation by Edward R. Dufresne © 2021

Some of you have heard the story of when I was eight or nine years old and found a cache of love letters under the cellar stairs that my father and mother had written to each other. Of course, I read them! At dinner that evening I asked my mom to pass the potatoes with the words, "Could I have some more, 'sweetie pie'"? I then asked my dad for the salt, and added, "Thank you, 'dearest darling.'" The next morning, I headed for the roasting pan under the stairs for more research and ammunition, but the pile of love letters had been removed! How I'd love to dip into those letters today, hopefully with a wiser heart than I had then, to read of the love that gave birth to me and my siblings!

I thought of that story when I was translating today's Gospel lesson. This passage is, in effect, an extraordinary love-letter meant for each and for all of us. It envisions us as forged into a chain of love. The first two links are the circle of love between Jesus and his Father. "The Father loves me," he declares, and because of this love, in just the same way, "as the Father loves me, so I love you." Three interlocking spheres of love: the Father and Jesus is linked in love with us, Jesus' followers.

'And this shared love changes you,' Jesus reminds us, 'because it alters my relationship with you. You must consider yourselves differently now. Don't think poorly of yourselves any longer. You're not slaves, you're no longer servants. You're even more than my *friends.* Dear ones, *you* are *my beloved!* We share a love, that's meant to fill us with joy. I want you to love and to be full of joy!'

So Jesus offers himself freely to us in this passionate, joy-filled, brimming-over love. And what, so often is our response to it? We dismiss it, we demean it, we don't credit it, we deny it. It occurs to me that, in this, we are just like Lois Lane. Remember her? One of the most important lessons

about love I ever learned, I grasped when I was 10 years old, while viewing TV. I learned it from watching Lois Lane, Superman's wannabe girlfriend. Lois did a lot of moping around, you'll recall. She obsessed over the fact that she could never spend enough time with her 'faster-than-a speeding-bullet,-more-powerful-than-a-locomotive,-able-to-leap-tall-buildings-in-a-single-bound, heart-throb, SUPERMAN! [Those writers were amazing back then, weren't they!]

Now, Lois, on the other hand, spent a whole lot of time with Clark Kent, mild-mannered reporter for the *Daily Planet*. There she was, her desk in the *Planet* newsroom, right beside Clark Kent's, but to *him,* she wouldn't give the time of day! Any half-awake 10-year-old could see that she had her heart's desire *right there beside her* — there for the asking, and for the taking. But Lois Lane, it turns out, (to use one of my mother's pet phrases), was looking for love in all the wrong places! Why, she looked her *soulmate* right in his bespectacled face and couldn't see that she had — standing there before her — just what her heart was longing for!

The point is that you and I, *we are forged into the same chain of ἀγάπη, of love that Jesus shares with the Father*. We are the *φίλοι, the beloved* of Jesus just *as surely as Jesus is God's beloved*. But, like Lois Lane, we don't recognize it, we ignore it, we overlook it, we forget about this, the greatest love of our lives. God knows, this is *my* problem. I get too *distracted*. Too many other good, but far less important things fill my heart instead.

Moving now, from the comic to the sublime, I think of St. Augustine who described, in the most exalted yet most sensuous of terms, his own history of shutting out and ignoring a love who would not let him go:

Late have I loved you, oh Beauty so ancient, yet so new! How late has been my love for you!

You were within me, but I was outside myself. You were there with me, but I was not there for you.

I sought you in things made by you, things that do not exist apart from you, yet they kept me far from you.

Among those beautifully formed things, I had become deformed.

You called me, you cried out to me, you burst in upon me, but I was deaf to you! You blazed, you burned, you banished my darkness and still I remained blind!

Then I smelled your sweet fragrance, drew in my breath, and I gasped. Now that I have tasted you, I hunger and thirst for you.

You have touched me, and so enflamed, I glow in your peace.

— From the *Confessions of St. Augustine,* Book 10, Chapter 17. Translation by Edward R. Dufresne © 2021

I find so helpful Augustine's confession of why he — why *we* — miss out on loving a God who loves *us* so much: we get *distracted* by things, good things God made, and take for granted God's very self, offered in the love of Christ! We don't fall crashingly out of love with God. Instead, we spend our lives *playing with distractions* and, pretty much *ignoring God altogether!*

How, then, can we fall in love with God again, and remain in love with God, our dearly Beloved? The answer, you would think, would run something along these lines: we should try to immerse ourselves in spiritual practices and holy observances so that we may aspire to the mystic heights of loving God. But that's not what Jesus' extraordinary love letter in the Gospel of John tells us to do. *His* instruction is much more down-to-earth and human:

"You'll remain in my love

if you keep what I have asked you to do:

[This] I ask and expect of you:

that you love one another.

Love one another in the manner that I love you."

Such a simple mission statement — "love one another, just as I have loved you." But we've created a big problem around this "love lesson," however. 'Love is the solution" has been reduced to a trite slogan that comes too trippingly off the lips of too many preachers and church folk nowadays. We risk trivializing sacrificial love, turning it into a powerless 'churchy' platitude unless we start courageously applying Jesus' teachings to real-life problems.

There are entire dimensions of our lives with which we rarely associate the lessons of love. Take, for example, the very real world of civil life and public strife. How often do we look at civil society and see there an arena for self-giving love? We might speak of *justice, equity* and *fairness* in society. But we rarely ask or answer the question in this context, "What does *love* require here?" Sacrificing one's own, petty self-interest for the sake of the common good is, I would suggest, a form of *love in the public square*. These days, we seem sadly incapable of acting as a truly united people for the sake of our fellow citizens. Too many of us are focused on making the personal calculation, "Well, just as long as *I'm* good!" and not on asking the more global question, "What is the *common* good?"

We need look no further than the current pandemic our nation and, of course the whole world, continues to face. We've struggled for well over a year to put this devastating plague behind us. Now, however, scientists tell us that Covid-19 may be with us, (albeit in a milder form), for some more years to come precisely because so many of us have refused to consider what's best for everyone by following simple behaviors like wearing masks when appropriate, socially distancing where necessary, and, for goodness sake,

getting a shot or two in the arm as soon as they're available! Think of these as small but real, perfect little acts of love for our neighbors.

We Christians are called to look at *the whole of life,* life in both the public and the private spheres, *through the lens of sacrificial love*. Whatever our politics, we who are followers of Jesus too often fall short in encouraging one another by word and by example *to love our neighbors with self-sacrificing love*.

So, my fellow beloved of God, let us do all we can to get love right: to remember how well-loved we truly are, and to apply love's lessons wherever we are, in the public as well as in the personal sphere. To love as we are loved, that's all this Gospel love letter asks of us, and that's everything. *Love* is everything!

Amen.

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