

## **Love**

The Fifth Sunday of Easter - May 19, 2019

Church of the Ascension, Chicago

The Very Rev. Patrick Raymond

At the last supper, when Judas had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." John 13:31-35

Some of you here may have known a man named Bob Boyle, often present here at Ascension in the past. His health had recently declined, and he died a week ago, on Mother's Day. I never met Bob in person and only learned of his death on Tuesday morning, through some Facebook posts that were forwarded to me.

One of those posts mentioned that Bob had left behind *'a wonderful husband.'* I decided to try to make contact by calling the phone number in our parish directory. Sure enough, a man picked up who soon told me that his name is Mac Detmer.

When I identified myself as the priest from Ascension, Mac fell apart. He seemed to fall into a deep well of grief. All I could do was quietly wait at the top of the well. As he composed himself, he explained that all throughout Bob's long illness and even since Bob's death two days prior, he hadn't cried. *"I thought I was OK,"* he said, *"and now here I am, crying uncontrollably."* Another wave of grief rolled in, and when it subsided, in a firm, clear voice he said, *"I don't mind. If this is the price of having been loved by such a remarkable person, then it's well worth the price."*

Mac later apologized, feeling awkward for having broken down with a stranger. I tried to reassure him that I felt honored to have shared that time and space with him. What I didn't say was that I also felt that I'd been given a gift. I felt as if I had caught a glimpse of God. Or maybe what I'm trying to say is that the love of which Mac spoke in that moment seemed to be of the kind that reveals and takes part in the very nature of God.

We humans write volumes of theology and poetry and self-help books about love. Artists in every medium try to capture and show love. We talk of loving chocolate or loving summer or loving incense in worship. We use the word so often in so many contexts that we often cheapen it, distort it, or misuse it.

The real thing is so elusive, isn't it?

We often miss the love shown in quiet sacrifices, or in day-in, day-out mundane tasks done in the service of others. We miss the love that doesn't *feel* like love when it speaks a hard truth that needs to be spoken. We miss the love that perseveres, and perseveres, and perseveres, sometimes far beyond the normal human breaking point.

When did we last think critically, long and hard, about love?

When did we last make a direct connection between a specific instance of love and God?

And then that moment comes along, such as the moment for me, unsuspecting at my desk on a Tuesday morning, listening as Mac Detmer stared down the chasm of his grief and said, *"If this is the price of having been loved by such a remarkable person, then it's well worth the price."*

I suppose I should add that I feel some reservation about using Bob and Mac to illustrate this message. Doing so may reinforce our narrow, persistent and mistaken notions that true love can only take place in a romantic or erotic context or can be attained only in marriage.

We are all savvy enough to know that romance and Eros and marriage may, in some instances, be a portal to, but are no guarantee of, genuine or enduring love. Furthermore, based on the teachings and example of Jesus, we are *all of us*, at *all times* and in *all places*, summoned to love – to demonstrate love, to risk love, to grow in love, regardless of our household circumstances or our carnal proclivities or our stage of life.

*“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”*

Jesus gives this commandment in the context of his last supper with his disciples. Chapter 13 of John’s gospel opens by informing us that Jesus knows that his hour has come to depart from this world and go to his Father (John 13:1a). How does he respond? *“Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end”* (13:1b).

The whole chapter is also pervaded by the ominous theme of Jesus’ betrayal by Judas. The verse immediately preceding today’s passage tells us that Judas went out *“and it was night”* (John 13:30) – and in John’s gospel, night always means more than the time of day. The night of which John writes is not a safe time or place for love.

Jesus chooses love anyway. And in so doing, in so choosing, Jesus is preparing us to make the same choice, to *be* love, to act in love, even in the context of betrayal or fear or ugly behavior by others, to persevere in the school of love and in the way of love to the end.

The teaching of Jesus in today’s gospel also begins to prepare the disciples for the work of loving each other in the Church, the Body of Christ, the community of faith that will continue in the name of Jesus after he is gone: *“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”*

As things turned out this past Tuesday, I went to see Mac Detmer at his home in Evanston later in the day. He shared a number of stories about Bob Boyle and about their life together, and I was surprised by the one story that seemed to stick with me.

Mac told me that when he and Bob Boyle first got together, Mac had a ‘Westie,’ a West Highland Terrier. And Bob became completely devoted to the dog and the dog to Bob. When that dog died, they decided to get another Westie, this time one from an animal shelter. Mac said the adoption process was surprisingly rigorous. Letters of recommendation were required! They asked their veterinarian for a reference, and the vet wrote a one-sentence letter: *“If I was an orphaned dog, I’d hope to be lucky enough to be adopted by Mac and Bob.”*

I suppose that story comes to mind this morning as a micro-illustration of a community of love that grows and reaches outward, a community of love that makes room within itself for others. But the story also led me to reflect that we humans are all strays and misfits and outcasts in one way or another. We are all in need of love, the real God-love, a love that is in such short supply and so often messed up in our world.

Mac’s Westie story also reminds me of St. Paul’s theology that all of us who have come to know and believe in and follow Christ have been ‘lucky enough’ to be adopted by God’s grace into a fellowship of love. And at least sometimes, in our best moments in the Church, others see God’s love in us, the same love God has shown us and we claim to have seen in Jesus. And when we share and reveal that true God-love, other strays and misfits and broken souls seek us out. They, also, are yearning to be adopted into the fellowship of love.

Our take-home message here may be an invitation to wonder and to respond, to wonder about and respond to love—the love revealed by God in Jesus and today commended by Jesus to us. Our homework, our life’s work in faith, is to choose *that* love, to continue acting in *that* love and reaching out in *that* love and risking *that* love, both for the sake of our own salvation and so that others may see and seek *that* love of God revealed in us. *Amen.*