

“WE KNOW LOVE BY THIS. . .”

1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18

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How many of you here have trouble understanding the resurrection? Well, you are not alone. In fact, you're in very good company. There's so much we don't know about what happened after Jesus died, except that those who knew him well, and some who didn't, had an experience, an apprehension of Jesus alive again in their midst: whole, powerful, loving them absolutely despite the fact that these were the same folks who had run away from Jesus not so much earlier, or betrayed him, or denied him, abandoned him in every possible way. They expected judgment, and they received compassion. They expected blame, and what they got was an experience of loving presence that transformed their lives entirely.

And once they encountered that Presence, it sent them searching, trying to make sense of all that they had known and experienced about Jesus, trying in human words to articulate the mighty work of God. They wrote letters to each other, and to new disciples who through some miracle came to believe their incoherent stories about the one who had died and was raised from the dead. And they wrote gospels, attempting to blend in narrative what they had experienced and what they had come to believe. They left those writings to us: our inheritance.

Our readings for this morning, from both the gospel of John and the first letter of John, are some of the latest materials of our New Testament, written somewhere between 60 and 90 years after Jesus died. Whole generations had been born and died since Jesus the man had been crucified. Through those years, the Christ believers had found themselves ostracized, viewed as suspicious and/or seditious; many had been thrown in prison, tortured, killed. And yet, despite all of that experience, for John's community, the center of the Christian message came down to love: God's love for us, Christ's love for us, our love for each other, our love for all who are made in the image of God.

It's miraculous really if you think about it. Most days we take for granted that Christian theology developed as it did, and we take pot-shots at it for its lack of perfection. But think about it fresh for a moment: Jesus—denied, betrayed, abandoned, killed. Early Christians: proclaiming a narrative that strained credulity, facing difficulty and persecutions both subtle and overt. And out of all this, they forged a theology that begins with love and responds in love, and insists absolutely that that love is greater than any power on earth. It truly is a wonder.

We theological types, if we have any wisdom in us at all, we approach speaking about this Christian concept of love carefully, even reluctantly. I remember my preaching teacher in seminary insisting that there was no subject taboo to address from the pulpit, except for love. “Sermons about love,” he would proclaim in a voice worthy of an Old Testament prophet, “take

the thunderous grace of God and dilute it to sentimental pap!” How’s that for a warning! But he had a point. The strenuous, sometimes terrifying imperative of Christian love has so often been cheapened, reduced to the level of saccharin Hallmark rhymes and bad country music songs. The love that the community of John speaks to, that our texts today point us toward, is absolutely not sentimental. It lives far away from warm, cuddly feelings. Love, experienced and reflected on by the early church, is entirely about transformation and commitment: the radical transformation of our hearts from the knowledge that we are loved absolutely, and the answering commitment to be and act in the world as the continuing body of Christ.

Some of us sitting in these pews grew up fortunate. We grew up in churches where from our earliest days, we were told that God loves us absolutely and unconditionally, no matter what we do, no matter where our lives take us. How many of you grew up in churches that proclaimed that message? Next question: how many of you believed it? Or did the other messages of your life, messages about guilt and shame and blame and all the ways you weren’t quite good enough get in the way of your believing? And how many of you grew up in churches or outside of churches in such a way that you were scared of God, thinking of God as judgmental, ready to pounce on your every sin, exacting in such a way that you could never measure up? How many of you?

My point is this: however much we speak about God’s love in the church many, if not most people, have trouble believing it. We, most of us, in our deepest hearts, we don’t know ourselves as valuable and beloved. Others have denied us this faith, or we have denied ourselves. It doesn’t matter which. The result is the same: in some part of us, we are not whole. We fear too much, dream too small, hold too tight, and do not love ourselves or God or neighbor as we might. If there is one gift we can give each other in the community of faith, one most important thing we can teach our children, it is to build up in each other the knowledge that we are always God’s beloved ones, and that each of us carries within some necessary portion of the divine image.

Dorothy Day, the early 20th century saint, founder of the Catholic Workers movement, tireless champion of the poor, wrote that the most essential spiritual discipline of Christian life is to believe in God’s love for us, to hold ourselves dear, because only as we know ourselves as valued and valuable can we recognize all others as beloved of God—see the face of Christ in their faces—and once we have seen that, she claims, we will not rest until the poor are fed and the sick are healed, and all are treated with the dignity due God’s children. Day’s discipline of seeing the face of Christ in others—even the most violent, foul-mouthed drunk in her soup kitchen—was less than sentimental. She often stated that you did not necessarily have to like someone in order to love them, because the meaning of love was to feed bodies, meet needs, and honor dignity. Not feelings, but work. Not sentiment, but the commitment of one of God’s beloved for another.

Day also often quoted Theresa of Avila the 16th century mystic saying, “Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which He looks

compassion on this world. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.” If the first mystery of the resurrection is the unconditional proclamation of God’s love; the second is the terrifying privilege we have been given to be the body of Christ in the world. We did not ask for this call. The Risen Christ gave it to his first disciples, and we should be as stunned by it as they were. Your hands; Christ’s hands; your heart, Christ’s heart. It’s more responsibility than we want or can imagine. And yet, those early Christians insisted, this is how we have experienced love. This is how we know love. This is how we do love. God’s beloved ones reaching out as the body of Christ in the world. Go and do likewise. Thanks be to God.