

Sermon for the Sixth Sunday of Easter
 Delivered by the Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas

May 29, 2011
 Grace Church, Amherst, MA

Acts 17:22-31
 Psalm 66:7-18

1 Peter 3:13-22
 John 14:15-21

Practicing love: you in me, and I in you

Today's Gospel passage begins where last Sunday's left off, in the middle of that rich and rather intricate section of John's Gospel that scholars call Jesus' farewell discourse. Jesus is saying goodbye to his friends, and we can imagine that if we were about to die, we might feel a strong impulse to share with the people around us what was most important to us. We might have some last words that we wanted to say, some final message that summed up everything we had been trying to express -- words of wisdom or words of blessing.

And so it is for Jesus, who has lived his entire life in a relationship of extraordinary intimacy with God. As Jesus prepares to die and to go back to the loving Creator who sent him into the world, he wants above all to convey to his friends the fact that we, too, can share in the same intimate experience of union with God that he experienced. We, too, can learn to love as he loved -- in fact, he will empower us to love; he will show us the way.

Today seems a good day to say a few words about love, especially on this Memorial Day weekend when we honor the sacrifice of those who gave their lives in military service to this country, and when we mourn the tragedy of war, which, however noble its objectives may be, to some extent always represents a failure of love on all sides.

Love can be so elusive, such a difficult art to practice. Maybe it's late in the day and I am tired; or I'm doing too much and feeling stressed; or I'm at the end of my rope, impatient and irritable -- well, in times like these my capacity to love, even my willingness to love, can quickly shut down. When it comes to love, we are all apprentices. So as we consider today's Gospel, what insights can we glean? What word of truth does Jesus bring us today?

"Jesus said to his disciples, 'If you love me, you will keep my commandments'" (John 14:15). OK -- got it: if we love Jesus, we will keep his commandments. But what are his commandments? If you search the Gospels, you will find some twenty, thirty, forty statements by Jesus that we might consider commandments -- for example: do not judge; turn the other cheek; be merciful; love your enemies; whatever causes you to sin, get rid of it; do unto others as you would have them do unto you; and so on. When asked

what was the greatest commandment, Jesus replied that it was to love the LORD our God with all our heart and soul and mind, and to love our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:36-40). In the chapter from John's Gospel that precedes today's reading, Jesus gives his friends a new commandment: to love one another. "Just as I have loved you," he says, "you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

You will notice that Jesus is speaking in the language of commandment, but most of us resist that kind of term. By its very nature love can't be forced. It can't be "commanded." Love arises only in freedom, right? Love is freely given and freely received -- otherwise it really isn't love at all, but only duty and obligation, a usually grim kind of "should." Yet I am grateful for the strong language of commandment, for Jesus is giving us permission to listen to the deep longing that God has planted in our hearts, our deep longing to love and be loved, our desire to connect in a vital, authentic, and loving way with ourselves and one another, and with the world around us. There are so many voices inside us and outside us that tell us to lay low and hide out, not to trust, not to feel, not to risk opening our hearts. So I say: let's take hold of that commandment! Let's renew our intention to love God, and each other, and the world! For that is God's desire: that we keep opening ourselves to love. Even in the midst of life's disappointments and failures and frustrations -- no, *especially* in the midst of life's disappointments and failures and frustrations -- God urges us to open ourselves again to the flow of divine love that is circulating at the center of things, inviting us to join in.

Today's Gospel passage gives us a wonderful line that suggests what love will look like when it is fulfilled: "On that day," says Jesus, "you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you" (John 14:20). On that day when we know love in all its completeness -- which is every day that we are fully awake, fully present to our lives -- we will turn to each other, and we will see Christ in each other's faces. Whenever we meet someone, even if that person is a stranger, we will know at some deep level of our being that we share an unbreakable connection: Christ dwells within the other person, just as Christ dwells within us -- "you in me, and I in you." As individuals, we share a deep union, and yet we are not identical. When we love well, we sense both our loving connection and our distinctiveness.

One way to think about this is to notice the two extremes of love gone awry. At one end of the spectrum, we can say to each other: you are just like me; we are exactly the same. It's no longer "you in me and I in you," but "you *are* me, and I *am* you." In psychological terms, this might be called an experience of fusion. If I am in that mind-set, I don't know who I am as a

distinctive self; I have no separate place to stand. I may be quite codependent, with my attention so focused on somebody else -- maybe my child, or my partner, or my parent -- that I lose track of my own life. I heard a joke about that, years ago: one way to tell if you are codependent is that when you are about to die, somebody else's life flashes before your eyes. That would be a clue.

In spiritual terms, this condition has been called "pernicious oneness" -- a refusal to accept the marvelous differentiation and diversity of life, so that everything has to be the same. When we are in this state of mind, what passes for love glosses over any differences. It's like taking a blob of Vaseline and smearing it on the lens of a camera: everything comes out blurry.

So that's one extreme: fusion. The other extreme is to perceive no connection at all between ourselves and someone else: "You are *not* me, and I am *not* you, and we have nothing at all in common." This is the stance of hostility and alienation. When I go there, I build the walls, dig the moat, close the door, and pull up the drawbridge. It's a dog-eat-dog world out there, and I plan to go it alone. I am a rock; I am an island. I am full of judgment and moral righteousness, and love is for sissies; love is a four-letter word.

Can we find our way back to that creative middle ground: you in me, and I in you? In that dance of connection and differentiation, of unity and separateness, we experience how similar we are, and yet we recognize our differences, too. We intend to see each other clearly, as distinct and separate selves, and yet we also want to keep our hearts open, so that we keep meeting each other with love.

There are practices that can help us to cultivate this kind of consciousness, and I will suggest just two. First, when we are with other people we can encourage in ourselves an attitude of inquiry and openness, an attitude of gentle curiosity. A priest and life-coach friend of mine tells me that whenever she speaks with someone, she holds the inner question, "What's it like to be you?"¹ Often our attention is focused on ourselves -- maybe on the question, "How am I doing? What do you think of me?" or maybe "How can I get you to give me what I want, and to do what I want?" Holding instead the inward question "What's it like to be you?" helps us turn our attention toward the other person and to listen closely. It can be such a tender question, a question that in our often frantic and harried world we rarely pause to ask each other, and one whose answer we even more rarely pause to hear: "What's it like to be you?"

¹ Maria de Carvalho & Associates, <http://www.unleashspirit.com/>.

A second practice is to reflect on a quote by Jewish philosopher Martin Buber from his classic book *I and Thou*. I have been meditating for months on this single sentence, and I continue to find it deeply moving and challenging in my own search to love well. Here is what Buber writes: “Let us love the actual world that never wishes to be annulled, but love it in all its terror, but dare to embrace it with our spirit's arms -- and our hands encounter the hands that hold it.”² Let us love the actual world -- not our fantasies about the world, not our ideas about the world, not our judgments and opinions of the world, but the actual world that never wishes to be annulled, any more than we ourselves wish to be annulled. Let us love it in all its terror -- and not just in its terror. I substitute other words, sometimes, depending on what is going on: can I love the world in all its boredom? In all its annoyance and pettiness? In all its imperfection and messiness? That is the challenge: to accept and to love reality as it is, for that is how God loves it: as it is. Only from that stance of clear seeing and complete acceptance can I begin to sense how love may be calling me to change what is here.

So I ask myself -- What would it be like to give myself fully to love in this moment, whatever the moment may bring? Jesus never withdrew from the world in safe isolation, looking down from above. He never held back from love until he saw something that happened to please him. He didn't check out, space out, tune out, close down, or withdraw. He never got so busy or so crazed that he put his head down and barreled ahead without noticing the people and the world around him. No, he showed up at every moment ready to encounter each person and situation as it was, and to meet that person or situation with love. That is why, when we love the actual world that never wishes to be annulled, but love it in all its terror, but dare to embrace it with our spirit's arms -- our hands encounter the hands that hold it.

Yes, we are apprentices when it comes to love, and we look ahead with hope to the gift of the Holy Spirit. We wait for the coming of the Advocate, the Helper, the Spirit of truth who will teach us everything we need to know. The Spirit enlivens and animates our quest to love, and when the Holy Spirit comes in all her fullness, on that day we will see each other and all the world with eyes of love, you in me and I in you.

² Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, A new translation, with prologue and notes, by Walter Kaufman, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970, pp. 142-143.