

October 26, 2008

24th Sunday after Pentecost, Year A, Proper 25 (Matthew 22:34-46)

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Ga.

The Rev'd Charles M. Girardeau, associate rector

I want to share with you some thoughts about what love is like according to various children - most of who range from the age of 4 to the age of 8. You may have seen these or heard these before - but for all of us they are good reminders about the practical meaning of what it is to love as the law and the prophets command - and as Jesus himself has shown us to love in his life and in his death.

"Love is when your puppy licks your face even after you left him alone all day."

"When my grandmother got arthritis, she couldn't bend over and paint her toenails anymore. So my grandfather does it for her all the time, even when his hands got arthritis too. That's love."

"When someone loves you, the way they say your name is different. You know that your name is safe in their mouth."

"Love is what makes you smile when you're tired."

"Love is when my mommy makes coffee for my daddy and she takes a sip before giving it to him, to make sure the taste is OK."

"Love is what's in the room with you at Christmas if you stop opening presents and listen."

"If you want to learn to love better, you should start with a friend whom you hate."

This morning we hear that the Pharisees wanted to put Jesus to the test; they wanted to lay a trap for Him that would damage His reputation and place His knowledge of the ancient teachings of the Hebrew faith. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" Jesus said "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." Jesus, in giving this answer, and in adding the words, "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets," passed the test the Pharisees put to him.

The rabbis of Jesus' day, and the great Prophets themselves, taught that the 613 commandments of the Law could be summarized in various ways. Here are just two examples:

"What does the Lord require of you?" inquired the Prophet Micah. And then he answered with just three commands: "Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8)

The Prophet Isaiah based the commandments on just two of them. He proclaimed: This is what the Lord says: "Maintain justice and do what is right, for my salvation is close at hand and my righteousness will soon be revealed." (Isaiah 56:1)

Do Justice. Love Mercy. Walk humbly with your God.

Maintain Justice. Do what is right.

Love God with all you have and above everything.

Love your neighbor.

And the phrase we often overlook – love yourself.

And, from our baptismal covenant –

“Will you seek and serve Christ in all people, loving your neighbor as yourself?”

“Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?”

We answer, “I, will with God’s help.”

We can, with God’s help. However, even with God’s help, loving the un-loveable is not always easy.

In the spring of 1996 I received a call from the diocesan office informing me that they had received a request for a priest to visit an inmate at Phillips State Prison. This correctional facility stood less than six miles from the property on which The Church of St. Mary and St. Martha would soon stand. I had no choice but to respond. I was the nearest priest. I made contact with the chaplain and began the lengthy screening process that would eventually lead to my being allowed to visit.

Several months later I made my first to the prison to meet Edward. I really didn’t want to go that first time. I will never forget the feelings and fear I experienced as I passed through the first sally port at the entrance to the prison grounds. As the second gate clanged closed I knew I was trapped. Then, as I passed through another sally port, this one with heavy metal doors and thick bullet proof glass, well inside of the prison, as I prepared to meet a stranger I was asking myself, “What in the world am I doing here?” “Serving Christ,” came the answer.

During this visit he told me of his life-long membership in the Episcopal Church. He shared with me that he had grown up at Holy Trinity Parish in Decatur, where he had served as an acolyte at the altar with the legendary and much loved rector, Harry Tisdale. I had served Holy Trinity too, as an assistant rector, and this point of contact gave us a connection to talk about for a while. Toward the end of our allotted time for the visit he asked, “Did they tell you why I am here?” “No,” I responded. “I murdered someone.” Silence followed for a time. Then he asked, “Will you come back to see me again?” “Of course I will.” “Will you please bring me communion next time, and use Rite I and begin with the Decalogue?” Absolutely,” was my response. This began a nine year friendship, that ended just months before I came to All Saints,’ and later a three-year-long ministry of weekly Bible study and conversations at Phillips which was, and remains, one of the most enjoyable and rewarding expressions of my ministry.

The second time I visited, Edward asked me, “How often do you use the Penitential Order in Sunday worship?” I answered, “Usually two Sundays in Lent.” “That is one of the things that is wrong with the world today. We have forgotten God’s commandments, and we are never reminded of them, nor are we reminded of God’s love and the command that we love as we are loved.” Sitting there I remembered my childhood when, as a member of the Junior Choir, I sang the response, “Lord have mercy upon us and incline our hearts to keep this law,” nine times and after the tenth commandment, “Lord, have mercy upon us and write all these thy laws upon our hearts, we beseech thee,” once every month.

In late 2001 one of the Deputy Wardens, himself an Episcopalian and someone I knew from the larger diocesan family asked me to do a weekly Bible study, which I did until I came to All Saints in December of 2005. Most of the congregation had committed violent acts, many of them taking a life. A large number of the regulars were confined in the mental health dorm. They were always moody, if not downright unpredictable. But they taught me a lot as we grew in faith together.

I learned about the injustice within the justice system. I heard about less than peaceful circumstances “on the inside,” seeing glimpses of the danger and violence of that community. I saw people treated in less than dignified ways, and was warned not to make a big deal out of it if I wanted to continue to visit. I also learned that the “inside” really is no different than what you and I deal with every day. I came to know Edward well, and count him among my friends, despite his sin and brokenness. And I came to know others who were on a faith journey, not just coming to the Bible Study to get into the air-conditioned space in the summertime, by “inside” names only sometimes – Big John, Elvis, and Doc. And by the time I said my final goodbyes, I felt safer inside the prison than I feel oftentimes on the street downtown and I knew I was leaving a community of God’s children whom God loved. Justice, dignity, service and even godly love for one another were all to be found within the walls of Phillips State Prison.

And one last reflection of love as expressed by a young child:

"You really shouldn't say 'I love you' unless you mean it. But if you mean it, you should say it a lot. People forget."

Unlike the Pharisees, Jesus does not try to trick us. We know that God first loved us, while we were/are yet sinners. We know of Christ’s love for us, shown through His birth, life, death and resurrection. We know that God is with us even now to fulfill all of God’s promises.

My sisters and brothers in Christ:

- Remind one another what God’s love is like.
- Remind one another of what love for neighbor is all about.
- Love one another as Christ loves us.
- And then find a way to proclaim and share that love with the world.

I know that there are folks in this room who feel as if they are imprisoned by something. Perhaps you have created a prison for yourself. And there are plenty of people around us who live in their own prisons. Once we know of Jesus’ love for us the bars are unlocked. When we live into that love, the doors of our prisons are flung open wide.

Glory to God, whose power working in us can do infinitely more that we can ask or imagine; Glory to him from generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus our Lord.