

**Sacred Readings**

Psalm 98 and John 15:9-17

*New Revised Standard Version***Psalm 98**

98:1 O sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things. His right hand and his holy arm have gotten him victory.

98:2 The LORD has made known his victory; he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations.

98:3 He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God.

98:4 Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises.

98:5 Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre, with the lyre and the sound of melody.

98:6 With trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise before the King, the LORD.

98:7 Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who live in it.

98:8 Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy

98:9 at the presence of the LORD, for he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity.

**John 15:9-17**

15:9 As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.

15:10 If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.

15:11 I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

15:12 "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

15:13 No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.

15:14 You are my friends if you do what I command you.

15:15 I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.

15:16 You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name.

15:17 I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

**Sermon**            What, on Earth, is Love?

All through seminary, and even more recently in the first years of my time here with you, I had an uneasy relationship to the Gospel of John. It is the gospel that is the most different from the others. Each of the gospel accounts is unique and different, and often in really important ways, but Mark, Luke, and Matthew are also very similar; they tell the same story differently, but they are recognizably the same thing, or they are many of the same things. And it's fun to compare and contrast them, to find out whether you are a Mark guy, or a Luke guy or a Matthew guy (and I'm using 'guy' as a gender inclusive honorific, you know, like my wife Caity is definitely a Luke guy, whereas Rev. Bert is *the* Mark guy, he has the whole thing memorized!).

But then there is John, and John is doing John's own thing. John's account is written in a much more self-consciously theological way. Its language is highly sophisticated and eloquent (maybe 'high falutin' even) where the other accounts are down to earth and accessible (even plain).

And John's account is famous for two things: for its great theological claim that God *is* love, with the great love commandment that we love one another always, which we read of today; and then, for its highly polemical and deeply problematic language about 'the Jews', who are held in negative contrast to John's positive Jesus community. And being famous or infamous for those two things at the same time has always set this gospel at a distance for me. Maybe even until this year, I would choose one of the synoptic Gospels over this one every time I could. And I know, you can do the work, you can set the context, you can do the good scholarly historical criticism, and you can demonstrate that what reads like anti-semiticism is not really anti-semitism, that that is a modern projection backwards into the text, that it is objectively anachronistic to read it that way. But that always has felt a little like skirting responsibility.

There is no way around that the long, ugly history of Christian anti-semitism has been rooted in the language of the New Testament, especially this very Gospel that says God is and only is love. Tomorrow

the Church marks a special remembrance of the Holocaust, for this reason.

Yet, at the same time, where would the Church be without the claim that God *is* love? Or, without the commandment, that most of all we should love one another? Especially today, in an age of religious decline in our country, this simple affirmation about love, and the boldness of the statement that love is the divine itself, fills us with hope, that still this ancient text, this ancient religion, does provide a revelation fit for the future. So long as Christians as well as non-Christians believe that God is love, there is hope. There is a future for us, for humanity, whether we call that future deliverance or salvation or anything else. If truly God is love, and love is still speaking, still reaching out to us, still calling us in myriad ways—if the God who is love is a living God—we will surely get there, we will reach and fulfill the promise God has always made, of justice and peace on earth as in heaven, and we will actually get to be a part of a luminous siblinghood, a truly beloved community, as the prophet Dr. King described and foresaw.

But certainly this raises the stakes for getting ‘love’ right, doesn’t it? If love is how we can experience and know the divine or God, we had better take care to think about and struggle with and fight for love in truth. We can’t afford a false love. False love is liable to be anti-semitic, and it is liable to be an outpost for empire and bring about *nakbas* or catastrophes. False love is liable to be just a kind of sentiment to console and excuse and perpetuate the most vicious cycles of violence.

I had a sacred music professor in college—and I think I mentioned this before—who tasked each student with writing the text for a hymn, and his only instruction, the only parameters he set, were that we could not use the phrase “God is love.” Because to say only that—and I’ve been saying that a lot lately—it doesn’t tell us enough. It only tells us anything at all if we have some idea already of what love is. God is love, *okay, great, fantastic*—that we all can get behind. But what on earth is love?

Is love steadfast support for the state of Israel, or is it solidarity with the people of Palestine? Is love spelled out in the Republican platform or the Democratic one, or in neither? Is Love self-sacrifice or is

it self-fulfillment? Is love stewardship of the land by whoever has title to it today or is love returning unceded land back to its indigenous peoples? Is love reparations for black Americans or is it a fair shake for every working American regardless of race? Is love between people only—direct and immediate—or is it social and systemic? Does love belong in the workplaces and classrooms and prisons of our country, or is it mostly a private matter for each household to work out?

Is our love between us here in these pews only a token love, the way Communion is a token meal, a mere foretaste of some new fellowship and relation beyond what our eyes can yet see on the horizon? Or is the amount of love between us being *measured* and judged by Communion? That until we actually achieve true equality for our people in the enjoyment of God's abundant harvests—and in the wealth of America—the service of communion is reminding us of our still coming up short, of our own hypocrisy, of saying we love God but not really loving one another?

The strange thing about faith and belief in God is that it inevitably leads back to the world as we find it, and to our convictions about how life and the world ought to be instead of how it is. The claim that God is love only has meaning and substance when it is *applied* to the circumstances and conditions of life. What God is doing with us—or what God hopes yet to do—is involve us in love, entangle us in it, make us part of it. How should human beings live in light of the love that is divine, the love in whose image we are made?

That is the question we bring to the Gospel. Gospel means good news. Good news for who? Good news in what sense? What—on earth—is love?

In Lent, thanks to Alice, we raised the difficult ethical and religious commandment from the gospel account of Matthew, that we are to love our enemies. We might have raised the commandment from Mark, that we should love our neighbors as ourselves. As hard as those commandments are, I think this one today may be even harder. Love one another, says John. *How?* How do I love you? How do we love each



other? How does a community that has already formed, that already lives together and works together and worships together, already respects and likes each other, how does it *increase* its in-house love? How do I better love you, how do you better love me?

John's community was convinced that the perfection of the love between us—much more so than the love we hold out for enemies or neighbors—is what would transform the world. Our perfect love, our otherworldly love, is how we will be known, it will be how others are drawn toward us and come to join us.

Love is *everything* to a church. Love is its reason for existing. People of all faiths and no faiths care deeply about justice and peace. But they need not obsess about in-house love like John did. *Unless* they believe God is love. Once you believe God is love, it doesn't matter what name you give your religion or your spirituality. Once you believe that, as we believe that, our whole lives get taken up into discovering the meaning of love. Because once we believe that, our lives don't belong to us anymore. They belong to the love that is God, to the God who is love. And we have to—we get to—abandon any sense of control, any allegiance

to history or tradition, to the way things are even now. Because we never know where true love will take us—the unknown love ahead of us. Once your life belongs to love, it belongs to the future, and to the everlasting life *in* love. Once our lives are *in* love, they are in God, and God is eternal. Love is forever and we may have our whole life in it, if we get it right. A church is a community of believers in *that*: in a life, in a sacred place, that is somehow already among and between us, through the love we already know, and yet is still ahead of us, in our perfected love to come.

As a flower blooms, so does God. God commands us to love for God's own enjoyment and for ours.

Alleluia and amen.