

“For Lovin’ Me”

About fifty years ago the folk group Peter, Paul & Mary had a hit with the song “For Lovin’ Me.” The song was written by Gordon Lightfoot and is about the cost of being in love with the singer. To be in love with him is to lose everything and be left desolate. The love described in the readings from the First Letter of John and the Gospel of John is completely different. The love of God, the love for God and the love for God’s people is rich, fulfilling and life giving. There is nothing selfish about God’s love.

For the last several weeks we have been hearing passages from the First Letter of John. The letter is so full of words about love that one could call it a love letter to God and to God’s people. John tells us what it is like to be loved by God. He also tells us what it means to really love God; not just say that we do. He says if we truly love God, we are transformed by that love. Love is like a holy infection: the more we love God the more loving we become towards others. Our hearts are filled with love, pushing out fear and anxiety. As those negative emotions find less space within us, we are less able to feel them. God’s love wins.

John makes it clear that loving God comes with responsibilities; it is not a free ride, or as Dietrich Bonhoeffer called it “cheap grace.” John writes that “we love God and obey his commandments.” God has given us certain commandments to live by. John tells us that God’s commandments are not burdensome. However, given the difficulty that so many people have with keeping the Ten Commandments, it seems clear that we need God’s love and help to do so.

In the first five books of the Bible, which are the holiest of the Hebrew Scriptures, there are 613 commandments. These commandments attempt to parse for the followers how to live a holy life. Instead of adding more commandments, perhaps we need to boil them down so that we would be better at keeping them. Jesus did that for us when responding to a young lawyer who asked him, “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”¹ Can someone tell us how Jesus responded to him? He 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.”² Love God and love your neighbor: that is the essence of all the commandments. It is what leads to a full life. God’s love wins.

John concludes by telling us that our faith expressed in our love of God conquers the world. He does not mean that our faith causes some great military victory such as defeating their Roman oppressors. Rather, our faith defeats the fears and anxieties that the world puts on us. Our faith in God gives us inner peace that overwhelms those cares and hurts that the world throws at us. They can no longer hurt us. With faith in God we find peace, and God’s love wins.

Jesus states much the same thing in the passage from John’s Gospel. When he says, “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you,”³ he is talking directly to his

¹ Matthew 22:36 NRSV

² Matthew 22:37-40 NRSV

³ John 15:9 NRSV

disciples, but he is also talking to us as his modern disciples. He wants us to know that the love of God does not stop at him, but flows through him to us. Does that remind anyone of something you have heard recently?

It could remind you of last week's Gospel when, in our reading, Jesus said, "I am the true vine."⁴ We said then that if Jesus is the vine and we are the branches, we get spiritual nourishment from Jesus. We said love flows from God through Jesus to us. We felt the connection to him was life giving. It also connected us in love to the other branches of the vine. Earlier in his letter John reiterates what Jesus is saying, when he writes, "those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also."⁵ Of course this means our brothers and sisters in Christ, our fellow branches on the vine. It is not just the roots and the vine that nourish the branches. We know that the branches and the leaves nourish the entire plant, also. If God's love is flowing into us, it will flow out of us as well. God's love wins.

We should also note the recurrence of an important word from last week's Gospel reading. Who sees the word I am thinking of? The word is "Abide." Once again Jesus tells us that we are to abide in him. What does it mean to abide in Jesus and for Jesus to abide in us? It means that we live in one another. Like the children I told you about last week who said that Jesus lives in our hearts. If Jesus is within us we are also able to live in him, and with him, and through him. We abide in each other. God's love wins.

Once again Jesus tells us that by abiding in him like the branch that abides on the vine, we will bear much fruit. The fruit is what St. Paul called the fruit of the Spirit. The fruits are "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."⁶ When we are living in and expressing these fruits, we are abiding in Jesus. When people know us by these characteristics, they are seeing the Love of God as given to us through Jesus. As Jesus said, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."⁷

God's love wins. With apologies to Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards love.⁸ The fruit of love are numerous. They include those fruits of the spirit and also forgiveness, justice, mercy, and so much more. Live into God's love. Abide in God's love. Make space in your heart for God's love to abide in you. That is where you will find true life; life that is rich and fulfilling. More rich and fulfilling than anything this world can provide. That's what we get for lovin' God.

⁴ John 15:1 NRSV

⁵ 1 John 4:21 NRSV

⁶ Galatians 5:22-23 NRSV

⁷ John 13:35 NRSV

⁸ Dr. King said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." I believe that justice is one of the many manifestations of love.