

Did you catch the common thread in our lessons today? *By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey God's commandments. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love.* Our lessons today are a wonderful gift for preachers and hearers alike – they're all about love. After I got over my excitement about this, I panicked. I mean, what can I possibly say about love that hasn't already been said, over and over again?

We have so much to say about love, not just in religion but in popular culture – think about our literature, our movies, our songs: *Somewhere my love; Don't wanna live without your love; All you need is love; Where is the love? Victim of love; The price of love; The one I love; I love rock and roll; Money can't buy me love; Love and marriage; Love is a battlefield; I will always love you; I love the way you love me; What the world needs now is love sweet love; Love me tender, love me true; Love hurts; Love thing; What's love got to do with it?*

Well, according to our Scriptures, love's got A LOT to do with it. We seem to know a great deal about love; we've certainly got a lot to say, to sing about love. But we aren't so great at actually loving one another, are we?

How do we love each other? We sort of know how to love those who love us, those with whom we identify, admire and respect; but what about those we dislike, don't respect at all; what about our enemies, those who despise us? How do we love them? What would it look like if we did?

Early church scholar Roberta Bondi describes love in her book, *To Love as God Loves*,* as “a whole way of being, seeing, feeling, and understanding, at which we arrive by a combination of God's grace, our awareness of what we want, and our own choices, which we make every day of our lives. Love is not a distant point at which we aim with the expectation that one day we will arrive at it... Instead, love functions as a goal by directing all our day-to-day actions, even the little ones.”

First thing we learn about love in our gospel reading is that if we keep the commandments, we will abide in God's love. The great commandment, of course, is that we love God with all of our being and that we love our neighbors as ourselves. How do we love God? The way I gauge my love for God is by observing how I treat others and how I treat all that God has created. I can in no other way grasp the concept of loving God – God is just too cosmic, too vast, too unfathomable. But I can gauge my love for others in the way that I treat others; in the way that I treat the “other.”

Did you notice the way Peter treats the “other,” the Gentile, in our reading from the book of Acts? The Holy Spirit had been poured out on Jews and Gentiles alike, and Peter says, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy

Spirit just as we have?" And then he sees that they get baptized. Now this might not seem like a big deal, but it was huge. All of the first Christians were, like Jesus, Jewish. They followed Jewish dietary restrictions, the males were circumcised, and they did not associate with Gentiles. That is, until they understood that nothing that God has made is impure. Peter learned this lesson through a vision. Peter was hungry when the vision came, and a large sheet came down from heaven that was filled with all kinds of creatures and reptiles and birds. And then a voice said, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." Peter replied, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." The voice said, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." This happened three times (three seemed to be a theme in Peter's spiritual life), and then Peter got it. When a Roman centurion sent for him because he wanted to hear God's word, Peter went to him and proclaimed the Good News to this Gentile, Cornelius, because he had learned that God shows no partiality. It was a huge lesson for Peter to learn, and it had a significant effect on the Church.

Jesus had his own experiences in learning how to love the "other." Often we think about Jesus' radical inclusivity: he let a woman wash his feet with her tears and anoint him with oil; he treated kindly the "unclean" woman who touched his robe and was healed. But what about early on in his ministry when Jesus told his disciples to go nowhere among the Gentiles or Samaritans; to go only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel? Later Jesus was approached by a desperate Gentile woman who begged him to heal her daughter. At first Jesus totally ignored her. The woman persisted, and Jesus said, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." The woman persisted and said, "Yes, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table." A light bulb seemed to have come on inside Jesus. He acknowledged the woman, her persistence and her faith, and her daughter was healed. By the end of his time on earth, Jesus was telling the disciples to spread the Good News to all nations, to all peoples. Even Jesus had growing edges, and they were constantly expanding. Where is your growing edge?

Do you remember when the word "tolerance" sounded progressive; when really, to show tolerance was progressive? Now it somehow seems more exclusive than inclusive to me. Society has a growing edge. The church has a growing edge. Needless to say, it's a slowly creeping growing edge, but a growing edge nonetheless. Where is your growing edge?

How many of you saw online or in the news the piece about singer-contestant Susan Boyle, on the British equivalent of *American Idol*? If you did, you saw an unattractive by most standards middle-aged woman, who before she sang received only frowns, jeers and condescending laughs from the audience *and* judges. Once Susan began to sing, though, it only a moment to turn those frowns and sneers into wide-eyed amazement and roaring cheers. What struck me, other than Susan's absolutely beautiful voice, was just how little chance people are given who are unattractive in the world's eyes. This episode was strikingly telling. It's not easy to love the "other."

Roberta Bondi says that human beings fail to love or love badly not because that's our human nature. On the contrary it is our human nature to desire to love and be loved; that's part of the image of God in which we were created. The reason that we're not great at loving is because that's how we compensate for the fear that often dominates us – the fear of death, the fear of our own physical and emotional vulnerability. Bondi reminds us that “God has come to us and still comes to us in Jesus to overcome our fears, to break the hold our destructive ways of being has over us, and to restore our wounded and distorted humanness, if we want it and are willing to seek it.” If we want and are willing to be open to God's perfect love. “This was the very purpose of the incarnation: we are shown the way back to the original image of God in which we were created and enabled to become really loving, truly human.”

Now, lest I've produced more questions than answers and left you all muddled up, or this all seems like just one more thing to have to work on, just sounds too hard and wearisome, think about these encouraging, comforting messages: abiding in God's love, living according to the great commandment is not burdensome. Our lesson from 1 John assures us that we know we love the children of God when we love God and obey *God's* commandments, and that *God's* commandments are not burdensome. This is reminiscent of Jesus' words to his apostles from the Gospel of Matthew: ‘Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.’ And this is shortly after he's commissioned them to proclaim the Good News, cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons. Sounds like hard work. But the fact is that abiding in God's love, and sharing that love, is the most energizing, life-giving, and joy-filled approach to life.

After Jesus asks his disciples to keep his commandments and abide in his love, he tells them that he's said these things to them so that they will have his joy and so their joy will be complete. “I've said these things so that your joy may be complete;” not so you'll do what is right or so that you'll save someone's soul or so that you'll tell others what to say or do or even so that you'll do miraculous acts, although that certainly is possible. Jesus says, “I've said these things so that your joy may be complete.” What brings you joy? What would make your joy complete? When we get weary of doing, when we get weary of working, when we get weary of thinking of all the work we need to do, of all that's yet undone, let us remember these precious life-giving words. Let us be still and bask in them and feel their full effect: “I've said these things” about love, about loving God and loving each other, “so that your joy may be complete.”

In the name of the Holy Trinity, one God, the Lover, the Beloved, and the Love overflowing. Amen.

* Bondi, Roberta C. *To Love as God Loves*. Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1987.