

SPG#204, Easter 5B

May 10, 2009

Acts 8:26-40

1 John 4:7-21

John 15:1-8

Last week, via the lectionary, we spent some time reflecting on Jesus as the Good Shepherd who loves us, his sheep. And in summarizing those reflections, I observed that in our lives, however and whenever we are strong and autonomous, that eventually we will face our vulnerability and our weakness. In the teaching of the Good Shepherd, there was an implicit understanding of our vulnerability as humans and our need to be loved and to be helped by God or by another human being. And so, even in our strength, the more we realize our neediness as humans, our vulnerability at times, our sheepness, the more we are in line to appreciate the loving and care of the Good Shepherd. And the more in line we are to appreciate being loved and cared for by another.

In contrast, today, in the epistle from 1 John, the dynamic of loving is seen in a different light. God's loving us is seen as active and dynamic. The primary illustration of God's loving us is the sending of his Son. The natural outcome of this view of loving in 1 John is depicted in the challenge for us to love each other as God has loved us.

And so, in being loved by the Good Shepherd, as a sheep, we are helpless in our vulnerability and weakness as God loves us as a mother loves her infant. And in that love, God loves us as we love someone in our family, who in their last days, has lost the ability to think, communicate, and care for themselves.

Perhaps a pitfall in our loving as God loves us is that we would like for love to be one thing.

Perhaps we kind of like the idea of a mother hen God. Perhaps we like the idea of being a passive love object. But, in the New Testament is the implicit challenge to learn about love as we love and are loved. And as much as we are called to realize our vulnerability, we are also called to take the risk to love with initiative and purpose. And in being loved and loving, we love as God loves us.

In Elton Trueblood's book entitled The Yoke of Christ he says, "Important and necessary as the theme of comfort is, it can never be the only theme if our religious vitality is to be maintained. There is another theme found strongly in the cumulative message of the prophets of Israel, which seems to be at complete variance with the theme of comfort. By it people are aroused from their complacency, they are disturbed by new ideas, they are driven out of all safe nests and sometimes sent long distances on arduous tasks which they would never willingly choose for themselves." And Trueblood refers to Jesus' words **Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.** Trueblood says these words of Jesus are utterly shocking to many Christians. And he asks the question, "How can the words of Jesus be made consistent with the familiar of the lowly Nazarene, healing the sick, comforting the lonely, speaking tenderly to little children?"

And so the inescapable conclusion is that to love as God loves is to acknowledge that loving has to do with comforting and being comforted. But it also has to do with being aroused out of our complacency. It has to do with initiative and purpose.

All of this may seem to be a hard lesson in the Christian life. And indeed it is that. For we would like to be the ones who are sought out to receive love. We would like to be comforted.

But the gospel in its challenges disturbs us beyond that comfort.

Three years ago, when my mother was slowly dying, and her ability to think and communicate was severely diminished, I would go visit her in the nursing home. I took with me a copy of "Reminisce Magazine," which she had enjoyed in previous times. She was not able to speak. And I was unable to say much that she would understand. But I would sit with her and turn the pages of the magazine. At times she would look at the magazine. But other times her head would fall back and roll for no apparent reason. With the memories of how alive and vital she had been in earlier times, it was all I could do to sit there and witness her debilitation.

More than once, after about ten or fifteen minutes, as I got to the end of the magazine, I would get up to leave. And more than once she would ask clearly, "Where are you going?"

In that question was my reason to be there. In that question was the realization that my presence meant something. And yet that kind of love was not something I particularly enjoyed. It was something to be endured. And yet, afterwards, I was glad that I did it.

Perhaps there are other examples in your life where you did a loving thing that was necessary or required beyond what was comfortable. And you did it because it needed to be done.

Perhaps in those times we can lay claim to loving as God loves.

All of this, being loved by the Good Shepherd in our vulnerability, and loving as God loves, as I said before, may seem like a hard lesson. And of ourselves as individuals, it is a hard lesson.

But implicit in the teaching to love as God loves is the understanding that all of this takes place in community. We love and are loved in our families. We love and are loved in this church community. At various times we will need to be understood, to be supported, to be heard, to be forgiven. At other times we will need to take the initiative, to reach out, to just be there, to do what is necessary for the other. If our hearts are open to both, then we are on the road that goes to loving as God loves. And as we are on that road, we may discover that along with being loved in our vulnerability, and loving when it is required, there are unforeseen rewards in loving such as the growing love between friends, or the realization that in this faith community you occupy a place that no one else does. When you are gone you are missed. When you are gone, you miss us. And in those relationships, being loved in our vulnerability and taking the initiative in love happen automatically in an atmosphere of spontaneity, joy and closeness. And then we know that loving is open ended, that there are other unforeseen rewards as we love and are loved.

May we always hold our commitment to love before us. May we always love as God loves us.

Amen.