

5 Easter 2003
"If You Love Me..."
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Last week I ended my sermon on a rather stern note. I pointed out John's teaching that one is either a child of God, in relationship with God, loving and knowing God OR one isn't. John told us how to tell the difference. He defined one key distinguishing **characteristic that sets the child of God apart from all others**. Do you remember what it was? It's repentance. "All who have this hope purify themselves."

Children of God want to be like their Father. They want to be pure as he is pure so they engage in a process of personal change and transformation that has them progressively more resembling the character of God. **Knowing God as a loving Father *changes* our lives.**

Well, today's lessons from John's Gospel and his first Epistle continue these themes and I'd like to spin them out a little further for you today because they're so rich. And this richness is enhanced by the fact that our Gospel and Epistle lessons are written by the SAME guy, John the Apostle.

He wrote these two very different documents, his Gospel and letter, maybe thirty years apart. He writes to two different audiences, talking about different things, addressing different issues and yet using many of the same themes and language, concepts and ideas. We can therefore use *one* to help interpret *the other*.

It's a little exercise in comparative literature. But unlike English class, studying **these writings can actually change our lives** because they teach us so much about living in relationship with God and with each other.

So let's check them out. We'll start with the Gospel. In it **Jesus very simply and clearly describes the Christian life**. He shows us what we give and what we gain and what is required of us. "If you love me you will keep my commandments."

Did you catch the heavy IF? That's something we should pay attention to. In a world that tries to muddy such things, John points to a very clear and simple standard that helps us know ourselves and check ourselves to see where we stand. "If you love me you will keep my commandments." **This is fundamental to Christian identity.**

Jesus tells this to his disciples on the eve of his death as he prepares them for his departure. "In a little while the world will no longer see me." But **Jesus promises them a future**. "I will not leave you orphaned." He promises a future relationship...with him and the Father. Though I'm gone, "you will know that I am IN my Father, you IN me and I IN you."

What's he talking about? He's describing a new relationship, a new connection, a new intimacy with God that'll happen when the Father gives them the Holy Spirit. You see **the Spirit is the bond of God's love**. As we pray in the Collect, the Father and the Son are bound to each other "in the unity of the Holy Spirit." He is the love that binds the Father and the Son.

And now Jesus is saying that when the Spirit comes upon the disciples THEY are caught up in that relationship, that eternal love affair. The Spirit, which binds the Father and the Son, thus embraces us with God's love and gathers us up and binds us in love to God.

And this changes their lives and ours. The Holy Spirit enables us to love God and keep his commandments, to purify ourselves, as he is pure. **The Holy Spirit connects us to God and makes the Christian life possible for us**. And this is all true because, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments."

John picks this thought up in his Epistle thirty years later. "All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. By this we know that he abides in us, *by the Spirit* he has given us."

Recognize that? It's a basic reworking of what Jesus said some 50 years earlier. Jesus taught how the Spirit binds us in love to God. And now John, at the end of his life, shows **some practical ways in which it works out in daily living**. He wants them to see the connection between believing in Jesus and how they treat others. And that's something we need be reminded of, too.

John makes it simple and clear. **If you love God you will love his people**. Did you catch that big IF? The two are inseparable. Loving others in Christ is what Christians do. It's just that simple. In fact, loving others is so fundamental to Christian identity that for John it's the *distinguishing characteristic* of a Christian! "We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another." And the flip side is, "Whoever does not love abides in death."

But what is this love? John defines it for us. "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. " Think about that. We are to imitate Jesus. That's an extraordinary level of commitment to one another. Parents know that kind of love, so do men in combat...but the people in the pew in front of you? That's what he's saying.

John even gives an example of this love. He asks, "How can anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuse help?" **This love even touches our possessions and wealth**, our stewardship of "the world's goods."

Can you see how your generosity in pledging and giving, your willingness to meet and exceed the tithe ties into this? (The tithe is a spiritual discipline of offering

10% of your income to God to use for the ministry of the Church and the needs of others.) **Stewardship actually demonstrates the quality of your love.** “We know that we have passed from death to life because we LOVE one another.”

As Christians this love will be more and more evident in our lives as we seek to give our lives to serve and bless others like Jesus did. **We are Building Christians for that kind of Service here at St Peter’s.** The Holy Spirit inspires us to love our brothers and sisters, and when we do it’s the surest proof of our identity as a child of God. It’s fundamental to being a follower of Jesus.

This love is also oriented outward to the world. We see that in our lesson from Acts. It shows the Holy Spirit, which inspires our love for God and one another, VERY actively guiding a man named Philip to love an outsider. Philip is led to share his faith in Jesus with a eunuch from Ethiopia, traveling the lonely and dangerous wilderness road.

The Eunuch is wondering who the Messiah is and the Holy Spirit brings Philip along to tell him. **You see God wants to embrace the outsiders, too.** And the Spirit inspires us to bring them that love.

It’s a very striking story how the Spirit led Phillip to share his faith with the Ethiopian. And I’m struck by the MANY, MANY opportunities we all have to do the same. I’ll close with an example.

Just look at the neighborhoods being built across the street. I drive through those neighborhoods on a fairly regular basis and it has begun to dawn on me that those houses are full of people, people with lives and struggles and joys. There are many people over there who are searching like the Ethiopian. **All they need is someone to guide them.** And you know what...that’s us.

Every time I drive through there now, I watch and pray. I watch the people to learn more about them and I pray that God will bless them and reveal himself to them. I pray that God will use us, St Peter’s Church and will use you all to be the channel through which that blessing so abundantly flows.

In the months and year ahead we are going to focus increasingly on how we might do that effectively. How **God might use us in ways we might not even be able to anticipate now.**

Jesus promised his disciples the Holy Spirit, to inspire their love for God, for each other and for the world. The Spirit is doing the same thing here among us now. So, as John says, “Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.” AMEN