

# **SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S "A COMMUNITY OF HOPE"**

## **Fifth Sunday of Easter Youth Sunday God's Love: Visible and Complete May 10, 2009**

**The Rev. Dr. Mario Gonzalez del Solar  
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1 John 4:7-21**

**D**ear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. **8** Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. **8** Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. **9** This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. **10** This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. **11** Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. **12** No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. **13** We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. **14** And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. **15** If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God. **16** And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. **17** In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him. **18** There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. **19** We love because he first loved us. **20** If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. **21** And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.

There's a definition of love in today's reading from 1 John that is the bedrock of the Christian understanding of the nature of God. John uses it twice in our reading, in verses 8 and 16: **"God is love"**. "Love" means different things to different people. For many of us it's the warm feelings we associate with being close to our family. In popular music and the movies, it's the passionate destiny of finding a true love, a soul mate. When John writes, **"God is love,"** he means something completely different. He is asking us to pay attention not to our experiences of loving feelings and passionate romance, but to an event that occurred in Jerusalem: Christ's death for our sins. He defines the love he's writing about this way, in verse 10: **"This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins."** Whatever our everyday experience or understanding of love may be, it's utterly and completely different from what John says here.

First, John says that God's love for us has always been. Second, he says that it is God's eternal and constant love for us that motivated him to send his Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Let's think about that for a moment. The eternal, righteous and holy God, who has decreed eternal death to all who depart from his holiness by sin, loves us so deeply that he became a human being in order to die to atone for the very people who have offended him and outraged his holiness. **"This is love,"** as John says. It is not a feeling or an abstraction or an idea. It is a visible, concrete fact that took place in the body of a human being, Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah and Son of God. God's love is visible in Christ. Not only in his death for our sins, but in all of who he is: in his eternal Sonship, in his incarnation and growth as a human being, in his bringing a foretaste of his Father's kingdom as he served, and taught and preached and healed, and in his coming again to restore the sin-sick universe to complete health on the Last Day. God's love is made visible in Christ.

And it's God's desire that his love be visible and complete in us. As John says in verse 12, **"No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us."** The invisible God made himself visible in the person of his Son Jesus Christ. Jesus has been described as "God with skin on". God made himself, his love, visible in Jesus. And he commands us to do the same. It's when we love one another with the self-giving love of God, God becomes visible: **"if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is made complete in us."** But remember: by loving one another, John does not mean feeling warm regard for one another. He means laying down our lives, going out of our way, enduring the pain of self-denial for the good of other people.

Today is Youth Sunday, and it occurred to me that parenting is a good illustration of how God's love is perfected in us. When a baby is born, it is

helpless. The parents love that baby because he or she is utterly and completely dependent on them. The baby can't do anything at all for itself. The parents have to feed it, take care of its bodily needs, carry it around from place to place, even turn it over in its crib. Because the baby can't do anything, it's up to the parents to do everything. The parents have to give of themselves. They have to give up their desires for the good of the child. They have to get up in the middle of the night. They have to give of themselves. They have to give up the way they've been living in order to care for their newborn infant. The infant can't be expected to care for itself. The parents must give up their needs to care for their infant's needs.

Things change, of course, by the time the child becomes a teenager. The parents don't have to give up the things they did. They expect to sleep through the night. They don't have to cover the electrical outlets to keep their child safe. They don't have to feed their child or dress him or her, and so forth. In other words, the child has taken on most of the responsibility for caring for him or herself.

Of course, there are many other adjustments parents have to make with teenagers, but the point I'm making is very simple: parents do everything for their newborns because they can't expect the newborns to do anything for themselves. Parents give up parts of themselves, as painful as it may be because they have to make up for the fact that their baby is—a baby. You never hear the parent of a crying newborn baby yell at it and say, "Stop acting like a baby!" It is a baby. Because it's expected to behave like a baby, it's up to the parents to do for it what it cannot do for itself by dying to their own wants and needs.

It's all these millions of little deaths parents die their baby that make love for the baby grow. When a couple is expecting a child, they don't spend nine months convincing one another they will love this child so that when it's born, they'll take good care of it. Their love grows as they give up themselves to care for it.

And that is what John says about God's self-giving love in verses 16 and 17. Like parents whose love for their children grows as they give of themselves for those children, our love for one another grows as we give of ourselves for one another: **"16 And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. 17 In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him."** As we rely on the astonishing love God made visible in Christ's life and death for us, we lay down our lives, our preferences, and our desires for the good of our brothers and sisters in Christ. And our love grows. Our care for one

another becomes a way of life in God's community of hope. God's self-giving love is made visible in our life together. And this visible, actual, love gives us assurance for eternity because it has made the invisible God visible here among us for all the world to see.

Let us pray.