

## **"When Love Gets Tough"**

+ Easter 6 +

May 10, 2015

Acts 10:44-48, 1 John 5:1-6; John 15:9-17

This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it! AMEN. The text for today's message is the Gospel for this day.

Today is a day to rejoice in being children of God – God who gives us life, author of creation, sender of the only-begotten Son, our brother and savior, spirit of love and nurture that beckons us to faith and calls us back when we have strayed. It is also a day to honor mothers and all those who have mothered us and others who were not their biological children. It is often a day when siblings get together – sometimes siblings who only see each other when they have to. All kinds of things cause family discord but try this one from the Mary & Joseph family. “I really don't want to spend time with Jesus – he's just so perfect.” Imagine what it must have been like to grow up as his brother or sister – even cousin?

The church of the Middle Ages assumed, long after there were any living witnesses to either conclusively confirm or deny it concluded Jesus must have been an only child. Who wouldn't stop after having the perfect child? Well, it is more likely that Mary and Joseph had their own children, ½ brothers and sisters to Jesus – after all there are some folks in the New Testament who are identified as His "brothers and sisters" (though in Middle Eastern cultures that often extends to cousins). The Gospels mention that later on in Jesus' ministry as a rabbi/teacher/adult, these sisters and brothers tried to take Jesus home quietly because He was embarrassing them.

Speculation aside the Gospel and the Epistle from 1<sup>st</sup> John take us to a whole new place in our relationship with Jesus, "I do not call you servants any longer, but (now) I have called you friends," while 1st John speaks of how we are to treat one another as "children of God," making us brothers and sisters to Jesus and to each other, relating us to all Christians of all time - those we have never known and will never know until the other side of eternity.

Friends of Jesus, Children of God – feels good to say and think about, but what does it entail - this friendship, this son-and-daughter-ship, a relationship that has a bright side and a dark side, both of which come into play "When Love Gets Tough."

When love gets tough, we struggle to do it, don't we? Anybody who's been a Christian for any length of time and who has sincerely tried to live a Christ-like life soon realizes that love has got to be more than an emotion. When it is an emotion, we speak about being "in love," that glorious, confusing, dizzying, dazzling state of being, characterized by normally sane and sober folks, getting all glassy-eyed over the object of their desire.

But somewhere along the line, "in love" has to mature into love and that's where we learn how tough love can be. We all know what "tough love" is, that drastically drawing a line in the sand we do when warnings and reprimands and time-outs and grounding have failed to change someone's destructive behavior. That's when you learn that love, as a verb, is never a mushy, squishy feeling, but an act of determined will. If you have ever been in that position, either as the giver or the recipient of "tough love," you also know that tough love is never pleasant even when it's absolutely necessary. It is the love that hurts both equally, a hurt willingly endured by the one for the sake of the other. Tough love is the sort of love we shy away from, especially and increasingly in a culture where the norms for relationships have changed drastically in just fifty years. Commitment – laying down your life for a friend/brother/sister that has somehow “let you down” or kept you from achieving your own goals because you had to sacrifice for family, for the oppressed, for others comes across to me as a symptom of an increasingly loveless society, unwilling to confront and unable to muster the committed/self-sacrificing/tough love that is necessary for us to truly reflect the love “the Father has shown to us that we might be called children of God.”

Love is tough when we come face to face with the unlovable, the unwashed, unmannered, uncouth, "un-us" people with whom we share this world or when our best efforts to love such folks are met with hostility and anger and insult. If you want an example of that, turn back to the Scriptures like John 3:16, where "God so loved the world," even though the world did not love Him back. Or to Paul's letter to the Romans where he wrote about us as being dead in trespasses and sins and still Christ redeemed us.

Jesus sets the standard, doesn't He, for loving the unlovable, and that sets the bar pretty high, so high, we are not going to meet it, let alone, rise above it. "No one has greater love than this," He said, than "to lay down one's life for one's friends." As today we consider the mothering

love that has shaped us – the sacrifices made for us so we could mature in faith and life we must also look ahead two weeks to Memorial day, when we will pause to remember men and women, who laid down their lives (who are still doing so) not just for their "friends," but for us their unknown countrymen who enjoy the freedoms for which some have paid the ultimate price – and not just for us but for men and women in countries far away who have been terrorized and victimized by those who had power over them.

That kind of love is our calling, to keep on reaching, struggling and striving, for unless we do, we become sloppy and complacent and cold. When it's tough to love and when love gets tough, you and I turn back to Jesus, not just for an example to follow, but for the strength and the courage and the compassion only God can give us.

It starts with forgiveness for every time we have crossed God's line in the sand and have not loved as we are loved. Only when we have been relieved of our own guilt can we begin to share the burdens of others. Only the forgiven can become forgiving. We turn from servants who follow orders to friends who follow Jesus, and from friends to brothers and sisters, sharing God as our Father.

I know that's easier said and than done. I know because, just like you, it's hard for me to love the ones who have hurt me. I don't always know the best way to love someone. And, maybe you've felt this way, too, sometimes I am just afraid of running out, of exhausting my supply of patience and kindness and care and that whatever love I have left to give has been stretched too thin and too far and will shatter and break.

This is why in today's Prayer of the Day we asked God to "pour into our hearts such love for you that, loving you above all things we may obtain your promises, which exceed all we can desire." The Holy Spirit pours love into us – love that knows no limits or bounds – love strong enough to nurture us and others through us, to heal, to lead us to forgiveness and newness of life.

Having held a couple of hundred babies over the waters of baptism for God's gift of new life whether they were sleeping sweetly, screaming high-pitched and horribly or expelling fluids or waste from an orifice (that would be one of our own 3 children) all I have ever desired for each child was that assurance of forgiveness, newness of life – love eternal and unending

whatever they might face in life. Such is our God's love for us – like the love of mother – wanting only what is good, what is best as tough as that commitment of love might be because of the choices we might make or the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

There, in the waters of baptism, in the gift of faith is a promise – that whatever good work God has begun in us, God has promised to bring to its completion. We may not feel much like conquerors; maybe more like wounded warriors, but cut and bruised by life and love, we who believe that Jesus is the Son of God, "have conquered the world."

That's when love conquers all, when it's tough to love and love gets tough and then by the grace of God, His love in us gets tough enough to endure and overcome until, at last, we are at home in heaven not as a servant, but as a friend and brother to Jesus who brought you there. Amen.

Now may God's peace that passes all understanding, lead us by His Spirit, to seek, to strive and to struggle as we learn to love like Jesus. Amen