

5th Sunday of Easter
May, 2010
Fr. Tom Elliott

Love

Acts 14:21-27
Psalm 145
Revelation 21:1-5a
John 13:31-33a, 34-35

*Opening: an audio clip from a young woman using a webcam to describe what she “loves,”
from: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QyAHe0StqSU>*

While I find this young woman’s words refreshingly innocent, and even naïve, they also remind me of how casually we often use the word “love.” In fact, most of the times we use the word “love,” we actually mean “enjoy.” I don’t *love* pizza, I enjoy it. I don’t *love* football, I enjoy it. I don’t *love* sunsets, I enjoy them.

Because of the casual way we frequently use the word, “love,” its authentic meaning has become fairly obscured, which is problematic for us as Christians since love is at the heart of our discipleship. In our Gospel reading today, Jesus said, “I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another. This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35). What does Jesus mean by “love”?

There were three words for love in ancient Greek and Jesus used the one considered by most to be the purest and strongest one—agape. It is a love void of selfishness; a love focused on what is best for the “other.” It is this attitude or interior posture that Jesus is talking about in the Gospel of John and that is so central to our Christian discipleship. What makes such love so important?

First, Scripture tells us that this type of love is the very *essence* of God. In the first letter of John we read, “God is love, and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him” (1 John 4:16b). God *is* love. Since we are made in the image and likeness of God,¹ we are living most authentically who God created us to be whenever we authentically love. In other words, if agape love is God’s very essence, and if we are made in His image and likeness, then we must make agape love our very essence as well.

Love is also important because it is eternal. Of the three theological virtues—faith, hope, and love—only love is eternal. In Saint Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians we read, “So faith, hope, love remain, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (1 Corinthians 13:13). Why is love greater than faith and hope? Because faith and hope do not exist in heaven, only love does. In the letter to the Hebrews we are told that “Faith is the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). However, in heaven, we will no longer need the evidence of faith and hope because we will see clearly the object of our faith and hope—God.

¹ Genesis 1:26

This is why St. Paul explained the difference between our earthly experience and heavenly experience, stating, “At present we see indistinctly, as in a mirror, but then face to face. At present I know partially; then I shall know fully, as I am fully known,” and he finished by stating, “So faith, hope, love remain, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (1 Corinthians 13:12-13).

Lastly, the absolute importance of love is demonstrated in that it is the sole standard of our faith and criterion for judging our life. In Saint Catherine of Sienna’s book, The Dialogue, she writes, “Merit consists in the virtue of love alone.” In other words, we can do a lot of “good things,” every day, but all of them are without merit unless we do them in authentic love, desiring what is best for the object of our love. This is the criterion that God will judge us by at the end of our lives. Saint John of the Cross wrote, “In the evening of life, we will be judged on love alone.” Authentic love is *that* important, *that* central to our Christian life.

While it is okay for us to *enjoy* many things in life, to get personal pleasure out of God’s awesome creation, it is even more important that we authentically love by fostering a desire within us for what is eternally best for others. This is how Jesus loves us and how He commanded us to love others.

SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISES:

- ✚ Read 1 Corinthians chapter 13. Then, read it again, replacing every use of the word, “love,” with the word, “God,” since love is the very essence of God. Lastly, since God created *us* to have love as our very essence, read chapter 13 again, replacing every use of the word, “love” with your *own* name! What does this stir up in your heart? Let it be the beginning of a prayerful conversation with God.

- ✚ In one sitting, read the entire book of Song of Songs (a.k.a. Song of Solomon) in the Old Testament and place yourself as the bride (noted by the “B” beside the paragraphs) and let God be the Bridegroom (noted by the “G” beside the paragraphs. Also note that the “D” stands for a chorus of friends). What happens in your heart as you read this book?