

6th Sunday of Easter
May 9, 2010
Fr. Tom Elliott

Love Again

Acts 15:1-2, 22-29
Psalm 100
Revelation 21:10-14, 22-23
John 14:23-29

A husband told his wife that he was going to be out of town for the weekend at a continuing education program. The wife asked him about the topic of the course. He explained that the course was on “Unconditional Love.” The wife was ecstatic! She helped him pack and drove him to the airport. She couldn’t wait for his return! When he got home a few days later, the wife quickly asked him what he had learned at the conference. He replied, “I learned that if you give me unconditional love, I’ll give you unconditional love.”

Last week’s homily was simple and focused on three reasons why love is *so* important, mainly, 1) because it is the very essence of God, 2) it is eternal, and 3) it’s the sole criterion by which we will be judged at the end of our lives. This week in our Gospel reading, Jesus tells His disciples, “Whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him” (John 14:23). Jesus’ invitation to His disciples is also an invitation for us look more closely at the *depth* of our love.

Abbot Jerome Kodell, OSB, from Subiaco Abbey, recently published a new book, Life Lessons from the Monastery.¹ In the first chapter of his book he makes some really important points regarding love. He specifically notes three types, or levels, of love—“because of” love, “if” love and “in spite of” love. Most of us are very familiar with the first two types of love. Every day, we find ourselves loving certain people *because of* their beauty, talent, money, and/or what they do for us. We also find ourselves loving people *if... if* they live up to our expectations, *if* they don’t make us uncomfortable, *if* they don’t inconvenience us, *if* they don’t challenge us, *if* they will meet our demands, etc. Abbot Jerome explains these first two types of love, writing, “These kinds of love are obviously very fragile and can fade when the circumstances change.”² The third type of love, however, is much different.

To love “*in spite of*,” is to love unconditionally. This is how God loves us. God loves us “in spite of” our weakness, woundedness, apathy, ingratitude, and all-around sinfulness. God’s love for us is not contingent on our doing the right things or thinking and saying the right things. His love for us is based, not on what we do or don’t do, but rather, on who we are as His children and who He is as our Creator. This is unconditional love. There are a couple of important things that we should remember about “*in spite of*,” or unconditional, love.

Unconditional love **accepts** us where we are at in life. Rarely are any of us where we would like to be physically, mentally, emotionally or spiritually. We don’t look as fit or pretty as we would like to look. We aren’t as smart as we would like to be or as calm and peaceful as we would like to feel. We don’t pray as long or as “well” as we would like to pray. We often find ourselves wishing that we were different or better than we perceive ourselves to be. Yet, it is precisely in such an internal atmosphere that we can experience unconditional love. It is precisely when we realize that we are not perfect and not who we would like to be that we can be loved “in spite of” ourselves.

¹ Jerome Kodell, OSB. Life Lessons from the Monastery. The Word Among Us Press, Maryland, 2010.

² Ibid, pg. 9

Some of the greatest examples of unconditional love that you and I witness in life are from parents, and more specifically from mothers. There are very few things in life as strong as a mother's love. Mom's may sometimes be disappointed in their children or desire better for them, but they frequently accept us where we are at and love us regardless of our hang-ups, inabilities, imperfections, faults, sins, etc. In this way, moms help reflect God's perfect acceptance and unconditional love for us. This is why Sacred Scripture uses the image of a mother to describe God's intimate love for us. For example, Psalm 131 describes God lovingly holding us in His arms in this way—"As a child has rest in its mother's arms, even so is my soul" (Psalm 131:2b, *translation from the Liturgy of the Hours*).

Unconditional love also **forgives**. Abbot Jerome points this out in his book, writing, "Unconditional love expresses itself especially in undeserved forgiveness."³ He explains how forgiveness is most extraordinary when it is directed toward that which is an inexcusable offense. Conditional love can forgive *excusable* offenses, but only unconditional love is needed to forgive *inexcusable* offenses. This is the type of radical forgiveness that Jesus spoke about when He told Peter to forgive "not seven times but seventy-seven times" (Matthew 18:22).

Once again, one of the greatest examples of this type of unconditional love is found in a mother's forgiveness. As one man once said, "A mom forgives us all our faults, not to mention one or two we don't even have."⁴

Our Gospel reading today and our celebration of Mother's Day remind us that we are to always love "in spite of," that is, unconditionally, accepting and forgiving everyone the way God accepts and forgives us.

SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISE:

- ✚ Read Psalm 139 and pay attention to the ways it describes God's unconditional love for us. Who is one particular person in your life whose love reminds you of the love described in Psalm 139? Make a list of a few specific examples of when you've experienced that person's love and take time to thank God for the gift of that person.

³ Jerome Kodell, OSB. Life Lessons from the Monastery. The Word Among Us Press, Maryland, 2010, pg. 10.

⁴ Quote from Robert Brault