

“Love: The tie that binds.”

As the story was related to me: After church one Sunday morning, a particular parishioner who could find fault in almost anything, complimented the Rector on his sermon. “Well done! I was so glad to hear you preach a historical sermon this morning,” the parishioner said. The rector, shocked by this unusual praise, thanked the man. However, and apparently not being able to leave well-enough alone, the man continued, “Yes, because I’m just sick and tired of hearing you preach about love all the time.”

I would imagine that it’s hard to be a Christian— and especially an Episcopalian— if you’re someone who has a problem with the whole “God is love thing.” In fact, if that is your problem, today would have been a good morning to stay home, because two of our readings this morning don’t just take about God’s love, they’re chock-full of references to it.

However, there’s more to these readings than simply love, and that’s what I’d like to talk about this morning.

In the gospel, which takes place after his resurrection, Jesus is looking ahead to what life will be like for his followers after his ascension. And knowing that it will be a difficult time for them, Jesus leaves them some final, parting gifts.

But this was nothing new; Jesus has been giving his followers gifts all along.

For example, Baptism was one of those gifts he gave to his followers. Baptism is the promise and reminder us that we are members of a particular community called the Body of Christ, or the Church. It was a good gift, but the problem, so often, with communities is that they can get to fighting over things like: “Who should be baptized?” and “How should we baptize them?” and “What does baptism ultimately mean anyway?”

Another gift that Jesus gave to his followers was Holy Communion. We gather to share bread and wine, and through those two simple elements we

recognize that God is present with us in a unique way. Like Baptism, Holy Communion was a gift for the community, to strengthen and encourage that community. But the problem, so often, with communities is that they can get to fighting over things like: “Who should be able to receive Communion?” and “Should we use wine or grape juice?” and “Exactly how is Jesus present to us in this gift?”

The Bible was another gift for the followers of Jesus. In it, God speaks to us through the lives of the people described in it, and through the words of the people who wrote it. The Bible, too, was a gift to the community, so that it could know how to live as the people of God. But the problem, so often, with communities is that they can get to fighting over things like: “Which version or translation is the best?” and “How should it be interpreted” and “Who has the authority to interpret it?”

The Church, the community of faith, was another gift for the followers of Jesus. And the purpose of the Church was to help her members to so order their lives that they are constantly moving not only towards God, but also towards each other. But the problem, so often, with communities is that they can get to fighting over things like: “Who should be allowed to join us?” and “What happens when we have disagreements?” and “How do we choose our leaders?”

Now, there are lots of other gifts that the followers of Jesus have been given, but I don’t need to mention them because I think I’ve made my point: Even though you may be a part of the community that follows Jesus, you’re going to have problems and issues that arise from time to time. Jesus knew that, and that’s why he gave us the gift we heard about in today’s gospel: the gift of Love.

But I’m not talking about the emotion, the feeling, we call love. I’m talking *more* about what St. Paul described in 1st Corinthians 13:

⁴Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant ⁵or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. ⁷Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

What Paul is talking about here would be better described as a lifestyle, and it’s what the King James Version of this passage described as “charity.”

Now, charity is a word that seems to have fallen out of favor, at least as far as this passage is concerned, but I think it still has its uses. Because, in order for the community of faith to function as God intended, her members need to regard each other with no small amount of Christian charity.

One thing I've learned throughout my life— and especially in the twenty-five years I've been working in parishes— is that the quality of people's relationships with each other, is in direct relation to the quality of their interior and spiritual life. And we get a hint of this relationship when we read how Jesus said that we are to "love your neighbor as yourself." And I have seen how, when someone has a hard time loving his or her neighbor, it's often— not always, but often— because they are having a hard time loving themselves. Our inner lives and our outer lives are connected, and when there is a problem with one, there will almost always be a problem with the other as well.

If this is true— and I really think it is— then how do we get our inner lives get squared away in the first place?

The foundation of our inner life is established by our parents when we are very young, and then by our peers when we're older. But as history has demonstrated— and as many of us have experienced— our inner lives can get pretty messed up for any number of reasons. Therefore, God stands ready, through his Holy Spirit, to help us get through the process of healing our inner lives; of coming to that place where we can believe that we are loved and lovable, and valued and valuable. And how that process works can vary with each person.

For example, it took me years of prayer, and Bible study, and spending time listening to the stories that others were telling, and trying to sort things through rationally. But, in time, I came to the knowledge and assurance that God loved me, and accepted me, and valued me.

My wife, Peggy, would probably tell you that her assurance of God's love and acceptance for her came after a long night of anguished prayer and supplication, and tears.

But sometimes it happens simply because you've been a part of a community that has embraced you and accepted you unconditionally. And pretty soon, you start thinking: "These people know me. They know what sort of life I've lived. They know the problems I've had. And they still love and accept me." And, when they come to the place where they know that they are loved and accepted by others, then they can begin to venture into the realm of believing that they are

loved by God as well. And then, they've begun the journey to healing their inner lives.

God has been in the business of giving us gifts, and he's given us lots of gifts over the centuries. But the most important gift is love: his love for us, and our capacity to have love and charity for each other. It is this gift which enables all the other gifts to bear fruit. And this gift is given to us, even as individuals, within the context of the community, and it is the gift which holds the community together.

You may find yourself sometimes getting tired of hearing sermons about love. I get that. But I can assure you that God *never* tires of telling us how much he loves us, no matter who we are, and that God accepts us, no matter what we've done. And for that reason, we, for our part, should strive to never tire of acting in love and charity towards one another.

Amen.