

Easter 5 B 2021

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

May 2, 2021

John 15:1-8; 1 John 4:7-21

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

Our second reading today, from the first letter of John, uses the word “love” 27 times. It’s only fifteen verses long. But it uses “love,” either as a noun or as a verb, 27 times in those fifteen verses. And it also uses the related word “beloved” twice. So, really, that word is used 29 times. Chapter four of the first letter of John is the distillation of a Christian message of love. The phrase “love one another,” occurs six times in this short letter, three of those times in today’s little excerpt. God is love, it even says.

I myself, by the time I was in my mid-teens, was convinced that love is the basic message of Christianity. I was convinced that the work of Christianity is love. Discipleship means love. Love is work. It’s not just a feeling. Love is commitment to the well being of others. Love forgives. Love cares. I was convinced in my mid-teens that that was the meaning of Christianity. Love. I was a liberal Protestant. I didn’t think God had any use for rituals, for traditions, for asceticism, for fasting, for repetitive rosaries, for pilgrimages to shrines. I thought all of that was kind of silly, kind of religious, kind of medieval. God is a loving God. And he wants us to love others. And there are certainly a lot of verses in the Bible that support that view.

But as I got into my twenties, my teenaged ideas about love were not enough. I discovered that my love is not enough. Love can solve a lot of problems. It can overcome a lot of problems. But some problems are bigger than my love. Maybe not bigger than God’s love. But in my own life, there were dilemmas and people and challenges for which love was not the answer. Do you know what I mean? Even when love is the answer, there are people who are nearly impossible to love. People who repay love with hate. And no matter how much you care about someone, no matter how much love you have in your heart, love can’t cure incurable illness. And love, like all human powers, is inadequate in the face of death. And there’s a problem embedded within love. That sometimes we love for the wrong reasons. Sometimes human love has a selfish dimension. When we love others or care for others hoping to gain something for ourselves. Conditional love versus unconditional love. I suppose all human love is conditional, on some level.

What had happened to me as I became an adult is something that Jesus says in today’s gospel: *“Apart from me you can do nothing.”* In my teenage years, I had developed a pretty good understanding of what a good person is like. A good person is a loving person. *“Love one another.”* I understood the power of love, I understood love’s capacity to transform, I understood love’s ability to heal. But I ran out of love. And I ran into problems for which love

was not the answer. I encountered pain too deep to be healed by love. Love one another is part of what the Bible says. But not all of what the Bible says.

“Apart from me you can do nothing.” What was missing from my life was God. I would learn in my twenties is that our religion is both vertical and horizontal. It’s about our relationship with God, as well as our relationship with other human beings and with creation. This is a structural feature of our religion. Of the Bible. Of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

One of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ‘Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?’ He said to him, ‘“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.’ [Matthew 22:35-40] Jesus himself summarized the law and the prophets with the command to love. But not just love one another. Love the Lord your God first. With intensity. With heart, soul, and mind. The greatest and first commandment, said Jesus. And the second is like it: *Love your neighbor as yourself.*

What happened to me is what happens to so many of us. I got the horizontal part right without including the vertical part. The first few of the Ten Commandments concern having no other gods, and honoring God’s name, and keeping the sabbath. When I was young I wondered what good those commandments did. They didn’t help anybody. The rest of the commandments were useful. But the sabbath? What good does that do for me, or the people I care about, or the world? The sabbath, of course, is about making time for God. It’s about resting in God. Something I still struggle with, but something I had absolutely no use for in my youth. Until I got tired.

In our gospel today, Jesus talks about branches. He is the vine, we are the branches. When I was young, I was trying to be a branch on my own. I was trying to bear fruit. I was trying to do good things. I was trying to be kind. Micah 6:8: *He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?* I was doing justice and loving kindness. I had that part right. I just didn’t understand about walking with God.

In the words of Jesus in today’s gospel, I was not abiding in Jesus. I was a branch unable to bear fruit because I was not part of the vine. The vine which provides the sap. Martin Luther loves this part of the Bible, and writes in his sermons and commentaries about the sap. The juice and the nutrients that flow from the vine into the branches enabling the branches to bear fruit. And the fruit, as I understand it, is love. It’s the law and the prophets. It’s doing justice and loving kindness. That’s what God desires. But you have to abide in Jesus, and he has to abide in you. Abide means reside. You have to inhabit Jesus, and he has to inhabit you. Otherwise you are just a branch, getting more dry and more crunchy by the day.

And that is how I became a Lutheran in my twenties. Because Lutheranism is a form of Christianity that is very attentive to the concept of the vine and the branches and the fruit. Lutheranism is framed in the language of the Apostle Paul: *For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.* [Ephesians 2:8] *For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.* [Romans 3:28] *We know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law.* [Galatians 2:16] These are Paul's sentences, which Lutherans lean on. But Paul's works are what today's gospel refers to as fruit. In fact, Paul will say, *"the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."* I want to bear those fruits. What do I have to do to quadruple those things in my life? How can I exponentially have more love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control? It does not come by my willing. It does not come by my choice, or my action, or my effort. *"Apart from me you can do nothing."* It comes from abiding in Jesus, the vine.

Now, how you abide in Jesus is a whole other sermon. It's many sermons. Because that is the work of the Church. Above all else, Lutherans say, are Word and Sacrament. It's the Word— the Bible, preaching, reflecting, studying, meditating, listening. It's the Sacrament of Holy Communion and the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. Above all. First and foremost, Word and Sacrament. But there is the life of prayer! There is the fellowship of believers. There is the encounter with strangers. There is the beauty of music and art and creation. Jesus abides in us in many ways. The sap of the vine flows into the branches in various ways. Many sermons.

But the point of this sermon is that *apart from me you can do nothing*. It's not just that we do bad things. We don't have the wherewithal to do the good things. Unless we abide in Jesus. Love is indeed one of the pillars of the Christian religion. But our love for others is not enough. Loving your neighbor as you love yourself is not enough. Those are the fruits that come from abiding in the Lord Jesus. We are branches. He is the Vine. Amen.