

A Call to Love! Reading: John 21:1-19; Easter 3/C

By the Rev. Karen Faye Siegfriedt; St. Benedict's Episcopal Church, Los Osos CA 5/1/22

When you woke up this morning, did you remember it was the third Sunday of Easter, that joyful season when we celebrate resurrection, new life, and a renewed hope for the future? If so, perhaps you pulled back the covers, placed your feet on the floor and exclaimed, "Alleluia, Christ is risen" or quietly murmured, "Today is a good day to have a great day!" Maybe as you made your way to the kitchen, you recalled your many blessings such as living on the Central Coast of CA, where you have access to the ocean, the beauty of the beaches, the smell of the incoming tides, and the abundance of shore birds migrating to and fro. Maybe you smiled at your loved ones and felt gratitude for your friends and family.

Maybe you gave thanks for being part of St. Benedict's Church, a community of faith that encourages living a resurrected life by reaching out to the vulnerable, seeking Christ in all persons, while loving your neighbor as yourself. This kind of resurrected life is a call to love, to live, to heal, and to contribute to the well-being of this planet. It is this vocation of *love* that all Christians are called to embrace, while trusting that out of the ashes of destruction, new life can and does occur. The kingdom of God is here, within you, within me, amongst all of creation. Alleluia, Christ is risen!

However, after you had a few sips of your coffee this morning, you might have then settled down with the Sunday newspaper or turned on the morning news. There you witnessed the struggles that so many people are experiencing today, as food and gas prices soar and the world faces one of the greatest cost of living hikes in history. As the death toll in the Ukraine increases caused by the Russian invasion, you became ever more aware of the evil powers of this world that continue to corrupt and destroy the creatures of God. Slowly, fear begins to deplete your joy and you start to wonder what the future will hold.

So the question I have for you this morning is this: What can close the gap between the resurrected life that God wills for us to have and the wounded condition of our world? The answer is a four-letter word that can heal the sick, uplift humanity, save the environment, and bring peace to the world. And that four-letter word is LOVE! Love is the subject of today's sermon. Love is the vocation to which all Christians are called. And love is at the center of today's gospel reading.

In the English language, we often use the word *love* to mean many things, sometimes rather loosely. For instance, some folks replace the word *like* for the word *love* such as saying, "I love your sweater" or "I would love to have a glass of wine." Other people believe they are *in love* when their hormones are on overload and the drive for sexual union is very strong. This is erotic love that can strengthen the marriage bond as well as exploit relationships. There are many kinds of love including but not limited to love for country, love for self, and love of beauty.

Today I would like to focus on the two kinds of love that are referred to in our gospel reading. The first is the love between friends that is rooted in mutual respect and a heartfelt kinship for the other. This is known as *philia*, a love that shows warm affection for one's neighbor. *Philia* delights in the bonds of authentic friendship. It originates in the heart, provoking warm sentiment and feelings.

A survey once asked 4 to 8-year-old children to describe 'love' in their own words. Their answers focused on this love of mutual affection: "Love is when Mommy sees Daddy smelly and sweaty and still says he is more handsome than Robert Redford." "Love is when your puppy licks your face even after you left him alone all day." When a four-year-old child saw his elderly next-door neighbor crying after losing his wife, the little boy went into his neighbor's yard, climbed onto the man's lap and just sat there. When his mother asked what he had said to the neighbor, the little boy said, "Nothing, I just helped him cry." To have five friends who care about you is one of the greatest riches a person can have. If you want to grow your church, then focus on providing a platform for the nurturing of authentic friendships.

The second kind of love that is featured in the gospel of John (as well as the Johannine letters) is a self-less love that originates in the mind. This kind of love may or may not have any emotion attached to it. It is based on ethical principles and commitment rather than the affections of the heart. It is called *agape* or sacrificial love. It comes into play when a married man remains faithful to and takes care of his

wife for years after she is bedridden with a stroke. *Agape* (or self-less love) is shown when a member of congress votes for a policy that is faithful and just, even though it may hurt his chances for re-election. Jesus said: "I give you a new commandment that you love one another. By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another." (Jn. 13:34) This is *agape* in action and is the word that Jesus uses when he asks Peter if he loves him. Let's take a closer look at today's gospel.

It is a few weeks after the resurrection. Peter and the disciples have left Jerusalem and have headed north to the sea of Galilee, some 80 miles away. By now, they are probably experiencing emotional overload with the arrest, betrayal, mock trial, jeering crowds, torture and execution of Jesus, followed by the empty tomb, locked doors, and post-resurrection appearances. Wanting to return to "life as normal", Peter declares: "I am going fishing!" This desire to return to *life as normal* is shared by the other disciples and so they launch their boat and head out to catch some fish.

This desire to return to *life as normal* is something that most of us long for, especially after experiencing traumatic or chaotic events like the pandemic. But as we heard in today's gospel, there is no returning to the past, only forward movement into an unknown future. Instead of returning to life as normal, the disciples once again experience the risen Christ as they haul in an abundance of fish. After the fishing expedition and breakfast concludes, Jesus and Simon Peter then engage in a dialogue that seems rather repetitive and puzzling.

Three times Jesus asks Peter if he loves him. Three times Peter answers in the affirmative. Three times Jesus then commands him to translate that love into action by feeding his lambs, tending his sheep, and feeding his sheep. In other words, if Peter truly loves Jesus, he will keep Jesus' commandments by embracing a vocation of loving service. The sheep and the lambs of which Jesus speaks, represent the weak, the vulnerable, the marginalized, and all who are longing for a more abundant life.

But why does Jesus repeat the love question three times? As you may recall, following the arrest of Jesus, Peter denied his association with Jesus three times before the cock crowed. Under stress, Peter's courage failed him and he denied the very person whom he had previously promised to lay down his life for. Peter's triple denial is the impetus for the three repetitive questions made by Jesus to Peter: "Simon, son of John, Do you love me?" And out of Peter's public declaration of love, he was fully forgiven, restored, and handed the baton for leadership as a disciple of Christ.

The kind of love that was required of Peter is a sacrificial love; a love which seeks the well-being of others. It is the kind of love Jesus showed to his followers when he stood up for the truth in the face of resistance, persecution, and even death. Jesus said: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." [Jn. 15] Eventually, Peter himself was killed for doing the same.

The gospel of John is a gospel of abundance and a gospel of love. It is not only about the love of God and the love of Jesus, but it is a call to all of us to follow in Jesus' steps of loving service as shown by the washing of his disciples' feet and his willingness to lay down his life for his friends.

Today, it is difficult for me to stand here some 6000 miles away, while Russian missiles are killing thousands of innocent civilians and destroying entire cities where they once lived. It is frustrating for me to have neither the wisdom nor the ability to end the violence or come up with a comprehensive plan to bring peace to the warring factions. But if love can close the gap between the abundant life that God wills for us to have and the wounded condition of our world, then I can make a commitment to love with all my heart, mind, and soul.

I can love by giving generously to those organizations on the ground who are helping the victims of the war. I can love by praying for my enemies so that my internal response to their violence is not retribution or hatred but rather forgiveness and the desire for true reconciliation. I can love by encouraging people not to fall into cynicism or despair but rather to hold onto hope, believing that the future holds new possibilities that are not evident in the present. I can love by reducing my own carbon footprint, making an effort to reduce my dependence on fossil fuels, the culprit which is causing political instability throughout the world as well as the destruction of the environment. Love is a powerful force that can bring about new life. "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends." (1 Cor. 13)

So Beloved, “let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.” (1 Jn. 4) Jesus said: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” (Jn. 15) That is today’s gospel in a nutshell. Listen!