May 06, 2018
Sixth Sunday of Easter 2018: “Reflecting (On) God’s Unconditional Love”
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Reading 1 Acts 10:25-26, 34-35, 44-48
When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and, falling at his feet, paid him homage. Peter, however, raised him up, saying, “Get up. I myself am also a human being.” Then Peter proceeded to speak and said, “In truth, I see that God shows no partiality. Rather, in every nation whoever fears him and acts uprightly is acceptable to him.” While Peter was still speaking these things, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who were listening to the word. The circumcised believers who had accompanied Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit should have been poured out on the Gentiles also, for they could hear them speaking in tongues and glorifying God. Then Peter responded, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit even as we have?” He ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

Reading 2 1 John 4:7-10
Beloved, let us love one another, because love is of God; everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God. Whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love. In this way the love of God was revealed to us: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might have life through him. In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as expiation for our sins.

Gospel John 15:9-17
Jesus said to his disciples: “As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love.

“I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy might be complete. This is my commandment: love one another as I love you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I no longer call you slaves, because a slave does not know what his master is doing. I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father. It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name he may give you. This I command you: love one another.”

HOMILY
Spring is in the air … Love is in the air.
At the end of their first date, Eddie takes Alice home. Encouraged by the wonderful evening they had, he decides to try for that important first kiss. With an air of confidence, he leans with his hand against the wall and, smiling, he says to her, “Alice, darling, how about a goodnight kiss?” Horrified, she replies, “What? We can’t.”
“Why not?”
“Are you crazy? My parents will see us!”
“Oh come on! Who's gonna see us at this hour?”
“No, Eddie, please. Can you imagine if we get caught?”
“Oh come on, Alice, there's nobody around, they're all sleeping!”
“No way. It's just too risky!”
“Oh please, I like you so much!!”
“No, and no. I like you too, but I don’t think we should – they’ll see us!”
“Oh, Alice, Pleeeeeease?...”

All of a sudden, the porch light comes on, and Alice’s sister shows up in her pajamas, hair disheveled. In a sleepy voice, the sister says: “Dad says to go ahead and give him a kiss. Or I can do it. Or if he has to, he'll come down himself and do it. But, for crying out loud, tell him to take his hand off the intercom button!”

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Love, love, love. Without really thinking hard about it, how many songs can you recall with the word “love” in the title? Three? Five or more? Some poor fellow from Canada evidently had some extra time on Valentine’s Day 7 years ago so he compiled a list of 1187 songs with “love” in the title. Of course, bloggers were quick to add even more songs that he didn’t have on the list.

Now, besides songs, marketing people, as well as artists, have surrounded us by the word “love” in our culture. Remember Herbie the Love Bug – the VW car, the movie, and don’t forget the follow-on toys. Then there’s Love Story, the song and the movie. Love with Food, a … food company, of course. Rochester has Lovely Warren, and how about Mina, a German girl’s name meaning Love, and of course, David, which means beloved. Love is all around us. But, that single word has different meanings, doesn’t it, depending on the context. You can love your country, love your dog … or cat (can’t leave them out, they’ll get upset), love your dinner, love your spouse, child, parents, friend, you can even love yourself … but they all mean something a little different from each other. The ancient Greeks had several different words that they used for the word love, and you may have heard Father or someone else speak of eros, a physical love … or philia, a love of close friendship or intimacy or affection … or agape (ag-ah-pay), a special type of love. Agape is given to others without expecting anything in return – it’s an unconditional love, a no-strings-attached love. Agape is often used to refer to the love that God has for everything He created, an unconditional love that God has for each and every one of us, whether we love Him back or not. Think about that for a minute – God has an infinite amount of love for me, for you, for a priest, for each and every one of us, no matter how much or how little we reply to that love.

Besides being in the air, and surrounding us in our culture, love is also in our readings today. The evangelist John used agape for love throughout his Gospel and his 3 letters – everything referenced that unconditional love which God has for each of us. So if you read or hear something from John with the word love, as in two of our readings today, the words may take on a different meaning when you consider that. In our Gospel reading, John is relaying words which Jesus spoke to His disciples just before His Passion and death, final words about the relationship between Jesus and His Father, and Jesus and His disciples, that help sum up what He had been teaching them for the previous 3 years … “As the Father loves me, so I also love you.” That’s unconditional love, like the story of the Prodigal Son – remember, the father expected nothing in return, he was just so glad that his son had returned home. Unconditional love, like the story of the Good Samaritan. Tremendous, unconditional love, forecasting a spectacular event that would be much more than a good story because it would truly happen, as Jesus noted, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” Tremendous, unconditional love which Jesus enjoined them to also give, if they were to be His disciples, “This is my
commandment: love one another as I love you.” Jesus was commanding His disciples to give that unconditional love, that agape, to others, to all others.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, as disciples of Christ, that is also the commandment we are challenged with today – to reflect the unconditional love that God has for us onto others around us, like a mirror. And this commandment, this challenge, isn’t for 1 hour a week, or 1 day a week, or part-time. Jesus said, “Remain in my love.” Those of you who are parents, know that the job of being a parent never ends – it’s a 24/7 career. As I began formation to be a deacon, one of the first things I was told was that I would be a deacon 24/7, and not just when serving at Mass, or presiding at Baptisms or certain other liturgies. And what about doctors, and certain other professions, where they are often on-call 24/7. So, just like being a parent, or a deacon, or a doctor, or a priest, isn’t a part-time job, neither can we be Christian disciples part-time. It’s what we are called to be as Christians, full-time disciples of Christ. Commenting on this Gospel reading, our Catechism calls this love charity and notes that “charity is the theological virtue by which we love God above all things for His own sake, and our neighbor as ourselves for the love of God … Charity keeps the commandments of God and his Christ.” That sums it up quite well, doesn’t it.

So, how do we live out that commandment of love today?

1. We look to the Catechism again, which notes that the spiritual and corporal works of mercy are actions of charity by which we “come to the aid of our neighbor in his spiritual and bodily necessities.” You may remember the Works of Mercy board that hung in the back of Church about 2 years ago, that reminded everyone about these works. “Instructing, advising, consoling, comforting are spiritual works of mercy, as are forgiving and bearing wrongs patiently. The corporal works of mercy consist especially in feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned, and burying the dead. Among all these, giving alms to the poor is one of the chief witnesses to love of neighbor.”

2. Regarding the commandments of God, remember that when the rich young man asked Jesus how to gain eternal life, Jesus first told him to keep the commandments, God’s commandments. Today’s culture often looks at the 10 Commandments as the 10 Suggestions. They are not suggestions – Jesus did not suggest to the young man to keep God’s commandments, He told him that he had to.

3. An unconditional love for all includes everyone, even those we may dislike, even those hated by the world. But, we are still called to pray for them, and to pray for their conversion if needed. I would recommend making that a daily habit – praying for them.

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God has an unconditional love for each of us. As disciples of Christ, we are called, we are commanded to offer that unconditional love to everyone else. And our reward? As Jesus said, “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy might be complete.”