

Sermon – Fifth Sunday of Easter

1 John 4: 7-21

A couple of weeks ago the funeral of the Duke of Edinburgh was held at St George's Chapel at Windsor Castle in England. The Duke was 99 years old when he died and had been married to the Queen for over 70 years. The funeral was solemn and moving. Two things missing from the service were a sermon and eulogies. They had been dispensed with in order to keep the service short because of COVID-19 protocols.

The last time St George's Chapel had hosted a large royal event was the marriage of Prince Harry and Megan Markle. And it was at that wedding that our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, became sort of a rock star preacher, with over a billion people listening to his sermon that day. In his book, *The Power of Love*¹, he says that he didn't know why he was chosen to preach that day but his message certainly touched multiple millions of people across the globe. His southern style of preaching resonated with many, as did his important message to the young couple.

His message was simple, there is power in love. It was a sermon that could have been preached at any marriage, for the message is important for all of us to hear and act upon. Early in his sermon Bishop Curry quoted from the first letter of John, the passage that is our epistle reading for today. "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is [of] God; [and those] who love are born of God and know God. [Why?] For God is love."

Bishop Curry used a little poetic license to edit the verse so it was a little more impactful. First, he said "love is OF God." He dropped, "Whoever does not love does not know God" and inserted the question – why? The answer, "For God is love." His editing made the passage a little more impactful, especially inserting the question, why?

At the end of his sermon he quoted French Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin who had written that the discovery, invention and harnessing of fire was one of the great scientific and technological discoveries in all of human history. Bishop Curry went on to say more about de Chardin because he compared the incredible impact of fire on humanity with the similar potential of harnessing the energy of love, that if done would change the world in the same way fire did.

Love is certainly a powerful force and coming to understand that love is of God, and that Jesus embodied the love of God in his life and teaching, changes our lives as Christians. God's love is revealed to us in Jesus who was born, in part to show us God and God's love.

We might feel that life in today's cosmopolitan world is tough, but life in Jesus day was tougher I suspect. The land was under occupation by the Romans who over taxed the community,

¹ Curry, Michael *The Power of Love* Avery, New York
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Sunday May 2, 2021

forced idol worship and stifled dissent. The religious authorities were similarly tough. The average person suffered much injustice from both these institutions.

So Jesus message of God's love was a radical message for the community. It was such a powerful message that it has resonated over two millennium and extended around the world into almost every community. God loves us, that is, all of us, before we even grow to understand what love is. Our first experience of love is usually from our parents, which is why it is important for parents to understand God's love before starting a family.

John says that God's love for us deserves reciprocity, in that what we experience should be expanded into the world by how we relate to one another. We are asked to love one another as God loves us. No one has seen God, John tells us, but by loving one another we experience God, because God is in the action of loving each other.

God is like wind. We can't see wind per se but we can see the effects of the wind moving the atmosphere, often with gentleness but also sometimes with great power. God's love might be experienced by us gently, but every now and again with great life-changing power. Through our commitment to love one another, to grow in our knowledge and experience of love, we perfect love as God intended. We are always a work in progress.

John goes on to say that "there is no fear in love, but perfect loves casts out fear, for fear has to do with punishment and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love." Now I know that I fear certain things. Some of these fears are inconsequential but others are certainly consequential to my life. I know that love is not yet perfected in me. I wish it was, but it isn't. And so I need to constantly reflect on how I live life and how I treat others measured against the standard Jesus set for us.

Many people fear God. They fear punishment from God for messing up. Often this causes them to turn away from God, to ignore God out of fear, sometimes fear of losing freedom to act at will. So fearing God due to fear of punishment from God is misdirected and harmful to our relationship with God and our neighbor, and indeed can be harmful to our own spirituality.

Jesus message of love, the love that is God, is the glue that holds us all together in community. We know what fear does to communities, it turns people against others, the weak, the other are often scapegoated, bullied and in many cases killed. Anarchy results from the full breakdown of a community not bound together with love. So we have a certain responsibility in the world to ensure communities know what love looks like, and why we love, when it is often easier to ignore the other or hate them.

Bishop Curry often quotes Dr Martin Luther King, Jr. because Dr King had a lot to say about love and hate in community, especially in the fight for equality. In an article he wrote for Jubilee Magazine in 1958, Dr King said, "in my weekly remarks as president of the resistance committee, I stressed that the use of violence in our struggle would be both impractical and immoral. To meet hate with retaliatory hate would do nothing but intensify the existence of evil

in the universe. Hate begets hate; violence begets violence; toughness begets greater toughness. We must meet the forces of hate with the power of love; we must meet physical force with soul free. Our aim must never be to defeat or humiliate the white man, but to win his friendship and understanding.”²

The power of love is only possible King writes by “projecting the ethic of love to the center of our lives.” The type of love that King writes about, and the same love that is of God, is what is known as *agape*, what King describes as “disinterested love. [A] love in which the individual seeks not his own good, but the good of his neighbor.” This draws from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians 10: 24. Agape love is not reserved for friends but it is a love for all people, a love that “springs from the need of the other person – [their] need for belonging to the best in the human family.”

The national church, under Bishop Curry’s leadership, has developed a couple of initiatives that seek to teach what Dr King first wrote about, that is, the power of love to change each of us, and in turn to change communities for the better. The first initiative is called “The Way of Love” and the second is called “Beloved Community.”

The Way of Love is intended to be a conversion to a new way of living. It is not intended to be a quick fix or a slogan we add to our parish mission statements. Bishop Curry first raised this initiative in his sermon to General Convention in 2018. He drew from his life and the lessons of monastic communities who have lived in community for centuries.

In his sermon he set out what we all might seek in life – to be loved, to be free and to seek an abundant life. He summed it all up by saying, “we seek Jesus.” The focus group who was helping him workshop this idea developed a set of seven life practices that form a rule of life, in a similar way that the monastics live by a set rule of life.

The seven practices for living this way and seeking Jesus are: Turn. Learn. Pray. Worship. Bless. Go. Rest. To *turn* is to acknowledge a desire for a new way to live life. In church speak we call this repentance. To *learn* is to know Jesus more deeply and the best way to do this is to read scripture, daily. To *pray* is to give thanks and to seek guidance for the journey of life.

To *worship* is to gather together to share in giving thanks, to pray together as a community and to sing praise and grow as a community. To *bless* is to acknowledge we are blessed by God and shown God’s love therefore we pay it forward with blessing others. To *go* is to go and make disciples and proclaim the good news that God is love. Finally, to *rest* is to put aside time for bodily rest, so essential for us to be refreshed to share love in community.

² King Jr., Dr Martin Luther A Testament of Hope: the Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr. Harper Collins, San Francisco, 1986 p17

As followers of Christ, members of the Episcopal branch of the Jesus Movement, we are encouraged to take on this way of life, and I encourage you to adopt this rule of life, so that we all might grow in love for God, for ourselves and for our neighbors.

Amen