

A Labor of Love
6 Easter - May 25, 2003
I John 5:1-6; John 15: 9-17

St. John writes speak powerful words about love in his Gospel and his letters. God is love. Those who love the parent love the child. This is my commandment: to love one another as I have loved you. This is love: that God sent his Son to be an atoning sacrifice. In this is love, that he first loved us. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. These are heady words, and they at first glance seem so obvious. God is love, and they will know we are Christians by OUR love, right? What could be simpler?

Well, there are stumbling blocks for me, at least. Let's start with the idea of *commanding* someone to love. There are plenty of times we can't crank out an ounce of charitable feeling towards someone. Especially when that someone is near and dear, and has grieved, hurt or angered us, we feel anything but loving. We don't even *like* that person. I just read Elizabeth Edward's heart-wrenching description of her husband's affair during his failed presidential campaign - and the continuing emotional aftermath. How can anyone whose trust has been so grievously betrayed be commanded to love the other person? Isn't that as realistic as asking a terrified child to "just relax?" How can you *order* someone to feel a certain way?

But love isn't *primarily* an *emotion* at all. Start where St. John does: with God's love for us. John spells out what God's love is - and it isn't just a warm fuzzy feeling! God's love is self-giving, sacrificial, forgiving, undeserved compassion that lavishes us with the life of his Son; pours upon us the Holy Spirit; adopts us as children of one heavenly Father, and brings us to everlasting life and joy in fellowship with God and all his redeemed. God's love is *action*, not just emotion!

One commentator said that love is God's *effect* on us, much as, energizing a heating coil and causing a pot to boil is electricity's *effect* on a stove. God's love causes stuff - wonderful stuff - to happen in our lives. In fact, God's love causes us *to be alive at all*.

We probably jump into the Love Boat too quickly, though, when we promptly exclaim, "Therefore we are to love one another with that same sort of love!" That's true, but we're getting ahead of ourselves.

Last week, we heard Jesus speak about how we abide in him, and he in us, so that we are living branches of one vine. Today he repeats this commanding invitation: abide in *my* love, even as I abide in my Father's. That's where we have to start if we're even going to try loving others as he has loved us.

Abide in my love, he says. Receiving God's love isn't a fill up at the spiritual service station. Receiving God's love means receiving God him-

self, being filled with him, transformed by him, shaped by him more and more into the image of his beloved Son. It's more like entering into a marriage than going to the gas station! It's more like becoming citizens of a new country than being recipients of that country's foreign aid.

One of the things this abiding does, is to crucify our human, limited, sin-distorted notions of love, and to raise up an image of God's perfect love within us. What do I mean?

First, let's be clear. All love, even the feeblest expression of it, has its origin in God, whose very nature is to love, and who created us in love, for love. But neediness, fear, pride, and ignorance distort most of our love. How often do we *say* we act out of love, when we're really bolstering *our* need to feel loved or useful? How often do we think that if a thrill, some warm fuzzies, or some other emotion isn't present, then we must not love the other person any more? How often do we confuse love and romance; love and control; love and need fulfillment? Let's be honest and say, too often by far.

But as we abide in Jesus Christ - live with him, day in and day out, we begin to understand, at least a little bit, his sort of love. He loves us even when we're distracted, petty, nasty, unloving, unforgiving, unfaithful, self-indulgent, or self-loathing. His love never excuses or covers up our sins and brokenness. His love often confronts, challenges,

even crucifies us, and daily raises us to new life in him. But his goal is that we should live as he does: whole and holy, loving and joyful, perfectly one with his Father and reaching out in love for our neighbor.

In other words, only as we receive and are transformed by God's love for us, do we have the slightest chance of loving anyone, any time, in any measure as he loves us!

Thankfully, we're not commanded to "love" simply out of the poor and wavering resources of our own hurting and hurtful soul. We're given all the resources of Jesus himself, as he abides in us. We're given his love, his obedience, like skilled hands directing our moves, like artful words shaping ours. Abiding in him, we are dressed in his love, to wear in our every encounter with other people.

And we're not commanded to drum up a particular emotion. We're not commanded to feel warm and fuzzy, or exalted and holy. We're not ordered to *like* a tiresome, repetitious old neighbor, but to pray for her, visit her, forgive her nasty comments, and help her. Elizabeth Edwards isn't expected to *approve* of, or even wink at, her spouse's sexual impropriety. None of us is commanded to overlook a family member's gossiping, a co-worker's petty thievery, or a fellow congregation member's constant criticism. But we are commanded to be "as Christ" to them, to encourage them to repent, to be winsome examples of

God's presence for them. We're not ordered to *condone* sin. But we *are* commanded to see every sinner as a person for whom our Lord gave his life, in whom he longs to abide, to whom he desires to bestow his Spirit, his joy, and his peace forever. In doing these things, we begin to love one another as our Savior has loved each of us. And as the reality of his love takes over our lives, how could we do otherwise?

So perhaps we begin to see that God's *command* to love isn't so strange. It's more like the command to a woman in the throes of giving birth: "PUSH!" It's more the urging to *do, now*, what needs to be done, what must be done if we are to bear fruit, bear new life, bear God's love into the world. It's not easy. It will sometimes be painful. Until we're in the thick of it, it will seem impossible, awful, frightening.

But in the thick of things, we're promised we will be given *everything* we need to accomplish our Lord's command and desire. And as his fruit ripens within us; as his love grows and quickens in the core of our being, we discover that his command to love selflessly, sacrificially, forgivingly, compassionately becomes our desire, and our fulfillment. "Giving birth" to God's love in another human being is also, simultaneously, the perfect expression of our love for God and his for us, much as giving birth to a child we love is meant to be a perfect expression of our love for our spouse.

And just as the joy of bringing a new life into the world causes a woman to forget the pain of childbirth, so when God's love is delivered through us to another human being, his joy overcomes the sorrow and pain and labor of love we have undergone. So it was for our Savior, who out of love for his Father and for us endured the cross: "for the joy that was set before him." The joy may be a long time coming - just ask Mrs. Edwards, or anyone who strives to love someone who has wounded them as deeply as we have wounded our Lord. The joy may never come to fruition in this life; but we have our crucified and risen Lord's sure promise that it *will* be made complete in the fullness of his Kingdom. After all, he's speaking of really is a labor of love - for him, and for us. And he's living proof that it shall never, ever fail. Amen.