



If You Love Me

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given May 21, 2017

John 14:15-21

One of the great and deep privileges of being a priest is to get to accompany people through lots of different life stages, including the process of dying. I once went to visit a woman I had never met before in the hospital, and it looked like she was very near death. She was struggling to breathe, and could not talk very well, but she was fully conscious and aware, so she and I had a conversation of sorts. She would say something brief, and I would ask questions about it she could answer yes or no to until I understood what it is that she wanted me to get. Her main concern was worry about her granddaughter Alice. She looked at me, and she and I both knew that she might not make it, and she said to me who she only knew as a minister but had never met before, Help Alice. And I said I would.

I said I would help Alice, who I did know, and I meant it. I meant it because there is something sacred about being asked something from someone who is dying. Even though I had no previous relationship with this woman, I knew then that to honor this request was very important. This woman would never know what I did with it; she would never be able to reward me if I kept my promise or punish me if I failed to keep it. There is by definition no conditionality in the request of a dying person, because they cannot offer you anything except raw honesty and presence in that moment. It is the opposite of a quid pro quo, if you do this for me, then I'll do something for you.

In today's gospel reading Jesus says something that sounds to our ears like a quid pro quo. If you love me, you will keep my commandments. I don't

know about you but I think it's easy to hear that sentence as a guilt trip at best. If you love me, you'll do what I say. That sounds like something some of our mothers might have said on a bad day, or even something an abusive boyfriend or girlfriend or spouse might have said. I suspect Christians for millennia have heard that sentence and imagined a God watching, slightly disappointed, and waiting to see if we would do the things we know we should do but struggle with. But nothing could be further from what Jesus is saying in this passage.

This text comes in the middle of what we call Jesus' Farewell Discourse in John's gospel. Jesus knows he is about to be betrayed and arrested and killed. He is going to have to leave them. And so he pours out his comfort and his teaching and what he most wants them to know. He makes a few requests along the way, too. But what he is teaching them is not conditional, it's not a quid pro quo. It's an overflowing statement of what is most important to him, that if they remember nothing else, he wants them to remember this.

And what is it that he wants them to remember?

He wants them to remember two things: Love of God, love of neighbor.

Do you remember on Maundy Thursday, during Holy Week, when we wash each others' feet? That comes from this same part of John's gospel, Jesus' Farewell Discourse, when he says, A new commandment I give you, that you love one another. In Matthew's gospel, when a lawyer asks Jesus what the greatest commandment is, Jesus says, You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your mind, and all your strength. And the second is like it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. The commandment of Jesus is to love. So when Jesus says, if you love me, you will keep my commandments, he's just saying, if you love me, you will love others. He's saying this whole journey, everything I have been and taught you, has just been about one thing: it's been about what it means to truly love.

What is it that gives us the capacity to love?

It is very simple. It is having been loved, by God, first.

What does that love look like?

Some of us have been through a lot this year. Some of you have lost parents, or spouses, or children, or friends. Some of you have lost your health and your hope of a meaningful future. Some of you have had a normal year but the every day grind of laundry and work and a to-do list that is ten miles long has just become oppressive. Where do we find the love of God in the middle of all that? If God loved us, wouldn't God protect us from pain?

What Jesus promises us in this text is to send us "Another Advocate, the Spirit of truth, to be with us forever." The word that is translated here as advocate also means comforter, counselor, helper, champion. It actually could be translated as defense attorney, or guardian ad litem. It's someone who makes our case for us. It's someone who is there to encourage us and comfort us. Jesus promises to send the Holy Spirit to us, to be within us and to encourage us and help us when Jesus himself cannot be here physically with us any more. Amazingly, the picture of the God who dwells within us is not the image of God who is watching from above, slightly disappointed – the cosmic Big Brother. The Spirit, who Jesus calls the Spirit of truth and not wishful thinking, is the Spirit who is sent by Jesus to stand up for us. To be with us forever. To help us. And to encourage us, no matter what is going on in our lives, to open our hearts and to risk loving and being loved.

This love to which we are called is not cheap sentimentality. God does not love us because we are cute and nice. In fact a lot of the time we are messy. We blow up at the pool service guy or the driver in front of us or our children or our staff. Some of us have itty bitty problems with drinking or porn or overwork. We do amazing things as well, like generously offering our time and our resources to 66 West and First Nations Kitchen and the Rotary Club, and over the course of a lifetime we engage in countless small

acts of kindness that no one will ever know about but that make the world a better place. We address hard things like racial injustice and are willing to get outside our comfort zone because of love. What Jesus is saying, on his deathbed essentially, is this. I am not leaving you without anyone to care for you. I am sending you the Spirit of truth who will tirelessly, endlessly, encourage you from within, to accept the crazy audacious reality that God actually does love you. Even though God does not take our pain away, God is with us unconditionally, and if we can recognize and accept this, it changes everything.

It means we are not orphaned in a world that does not care. It means we can be healed from the terrible image of a God we can never please because we will never be good enough. It means we can rejoice and trust that no matter what we go through, we are not alone. It means that even if we go through the worst life has to offer, the worst does not need to define us. Love defines us. Even if we are living with very limited options, the capacity to love God and love our neighbor gives us the ability to contribute meaningfully in this world. When we love others, it is also not cheap sentimentality. It doesn't mean we put up with abusive behavior or look the other way when the people we love are moving in directions that do not lead to life. Love is about seeing the innate dignity and worth of a person and calling them to recognize and live from that place. It's about being courageous enough to risk vulnerability and own up to it when we make mistakes, because the love of God assures us we can be forgiven and healed. Love calls out goodness in each other, and rejoices in that goodness. Love calls us to seek justice for every human being, to oppose systems that deny goodness in groups of people.

My prayer for each of us is that we would be freed forever from the conditional, quid-pro-quo image of God which has been so hurtful to so many throughout the ages. May we instead be granted eyes to see and hearts to receive the love of God, which is beyond conditions, and by it be freed to love, Jesus' only commandment. Amen.