

**Acts of Faith:
Love**

Just to be clear, Mother's Day is not a Church holiday. It cannot be found on any liturgical calendar. Yet it presents a particular set of theological challenges for the preacher and congregation. One pastor gives an example of one such challenge in relaying a conversation that took place with a member of his congregation the Sunday before Mother's Day. A woman approached him and said: "I'm bringing my mother to church next Sunday, Reverend, and you can talk about anything you want. But it had better include motherhood and it had better be good."

Of course there are further and much more serious complications and challenges that can crop up on this day. So I think the best thing to do is just to get them out on the table and address them right up front. Let's be honest: not everyone has reason to celebrate on Mother's Day. For some, it can be a rather complicated day, I imagine. It is sad but true that not everyone has experienced a loving relationship with their own mother. Others may have lost their mother, recently or some time ago, and this day may bring a mixture of celebration and grief. For others yet, it may be a painful reminder that they, for whatever reason, are not able to experience biological motherhood or have lost a child. The point is that human relationships are complicated and despite the image that greeting card companies want to put forth, feelings between parents and children cannot be summarized by a rhyming couplet or two.

For all of these, as well as many other reasons, the preacher has an important decision to make on Mother's Day: either to ignore it and leave it to the greeting card companies and flower retailers or to address these tough issues head on with all of the

potential complications and pitfalls. I have, obviously, chosen the latter. And I have done so because of our Scripture lesson today and what it claims about our messy, human attempts to express and share love with one another. Even our own broken attempts at love and relationship have some connection to the divine. John tells us: God is love and those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them.

Take note, however, the central affirmation of I John *is not* that God is loving, or kind or forgiving. That is good as far as it goes, but apparently it doesn't go far enough. For John tells us that God, by God's very nature, *is* love. But we need to be clear because this could be easily misinterpreted. One theologian says, "To say that love is God is romantic idealism. [But] to say, [as John does] that God is love is either the last straw or the ultimate truth."¹ In other words, something very serious is being claimed here about the nature of love itself. For when the Bible talks about love it is not talking about an abstract or sentimental concept, but concrete action and real life, which is often messy and complicated. And perhaps that helps us see the reticence that some preachers feel with regards to addressing Mother's Day in the service of worship. It would be easy for us to overly sentimentalize love, especially on this day. But at the same time we know, perhaps especially those who have experienced motherhood, just how hard it can be. We continually fail to love each other perfectly, but love always seems to give us another chance. And that, for me, is the connection, the common thread here between the type of love we talk about in church and the love we celebrate on Mother's Day.

One of my favorite authors puts it so well: "In the Christian sense, love is not primarily an emotion, but an act of the will. When Jesus tells us to love our neighbors,

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Beyond Words* (San Francisco: Harpers, 2004) 231.

he is not telling us to love them in the sense of responding to them with a cozy emotional feeling. You can as easily produce a cozy emotional feeling on demand as you can a yawn or a sneeze. On the contrary, he is telling us to love our neighbors in the sense of being willing to work for their well-being even if it means sacrificing our own well-being to that end.”²

The series for this Easter season is called *Acts of Faith*. The story of Easter reminds us that God is alive and at work in us and in the world. And it beckons us to join in God’s work of transforming the world through concrete action and practices. This work we are called to is the work of love that Jesus’ exemplified and it is not easy! But that is the point! As the poet Rilke puts it, “Love is good because it is difficult. It is perhaps the most difficult task set before us, the ultimate thing, the final trial and test, the work for which all other work is only preparation.”³ But what if we fail to act with love, as we so often do? John reassures us that God’s love is being perfected in us. And that is the good news for all of us, regardless of our experiences of love and family. We are not already expected to be perfect, only to be open to God’s work in our lives.

As one theologian puts it, “We cannot achieve love, generate love, wield love [on our own] ...When I love someone it is not something that I have achieved, but something that is happening through me, something that is happening to me as well as to [the other.]...it is something bigger than [us], infinitely bigger, because wherever love enters the world, God enters.”⁴ That sounds like a good reason to celebrate love in all of its forms, wherever, whenever and in whomever we find it!

² Ibid., 231-232.

³ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet* (New York: Dover Publications, 2002) 31.

⁴ F. Buechner, *Listening to Your Life* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992) 230.