

Sixth Sunday of Easter, Cycle B

Acts of the Apostles 10:25-26, 34-35, 44-48; 1John 4:7-10; and John 15:9-17

"Beloved, let us love one another, because love is of God." It sounds so simple and lovely. Yet, the primary human struggle is between love and self-interest. Here's an example on the personal level: When I was a child, my father's family fought over how my father, the eldest of nine, managed the family inheritance. The fight entailed legal battles and the abrupt end of our social interactions, which I had treasured. We spent one Christmas facing a sheriff's sale of our home. Later my father reconciled with his siblings and a family reunion was held. I refused to go. Why? My grudge did not protect or defend my father who was eager to begin anew. My resentment just created unkindness in me; it was a burden in my heart. Yet I thought it in my self-interest to rebuff reconciliation, to deny love.

How much abuse do we dish out or ignore because we are carrying some hurt or trying to protect something we think essential to life? This same distorted sense of self-interest plays out in national and global arenas. Closing borders to immigrants has the same root, as do all forms of bullying, violence and hoarding of wealth. Researcher John Biewen has noted that the great Thomas Jefferson knew that slavery was wrong even as he owned 130 Black persons. "His argument with himself raged, but his self-interest won out."¹ We could give example after example of individuals, communities and civilizations rife with suffering and injustice – all in the name of self-interest.

This reality stands in stark contrast to the message of this Sunday's readings, a dramatic restatement of the message of Easter. "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." Because we might think we earned this, the author of 1 John underlines: "In this is love: not that we have loved God but that God loved us and sent his Son as expiation for our sins." In other words, God does whatever it takes to be reconciled with us. The impossible image of giving the life of one's child for someone who has hurt us describes the reality of God's love in a way we can grasp. God's priority, the priority of Love itself, is reconciliation. Nothing will keep God from accomplishing it.

Acts 10-11 shows God's desire to be one with all humans and God's determination in making this happen. God dismantles one of the most substantial social barriers of the first-century Mediterranean world, the line between Jews and Gentiles. Scripture itself emphasized the need for separation. No eating together; no staying in the same house; no praying together; no intermarrying. The early Christians, who understood themselves as Jews, thought it was important to maintain this separation. Instead, God's angel tells Cornelius, a virtuous Roman centurion, to send for Peter. Peter, meanwhile, receives three visions where God commands Peter to welcome Gentiles. Peter goes to Cornelius' home and the Holy Spirit descends on Cornelius' household in the exact same way as on Pentecost. Jewish Christians in Jerusalem hear that Peter decided to baptize Gentiles and they protest. But Peter changes their minds, saying, "Who was I that I could hinder God?" (11:17)

This is why I say that these readings are a restatement of the Easter message. Despite the barriers we raise to love and unity, despite the self-interest we pursue, God is on a course toward love and will not be deterred. Resurrection is the end of all our stories. When 1John tells us that God is Love, Biblical commentator, Neal M. Flanagan, points out that "God is not love in the abstract but in all [God's] activity, [God] creates lovingly, [God] saves lovingly, [God] judges lovingly."² One way or another, God will melt the resentment in my heart. One way or another, God will remove the self-interest of racism from our nation. Jesus tells us he has chosen us – us! – "to go and bear fruit that will remain" – *mene*, to abide or last – by loving one another. We overcome self-interest by laying down our lives. That choice places us squarely in the inevitable love of God and life, endless life, is the result!

- ❖ In your own life or in human history, where has God brought the life-giving inevitability of love?
- ❖ In your own life or in the world, where do you need God to bring the life-giving inevitability of love?

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¹ "The Long View, I: On Being White," interview with Krista Tippet. *On Being*. 20-10-29. Time stamp 41:33.

² "1John," *Collegeville Bible Commentary*. Liturgical Press, 1992. p. 1025.