

Easter 5
I John 4: 7-21
1 May 2, 2021

In his beautiful tribute to his mother called "The Color of Water", the author James McBride opens his chapter entitled The New Testament with this simple statement "Mommy loved God." I smiled when I read this. I smiled because James McBride is a stately 63 year-old man, famous for his brilliant novels such as The Good Lord Bird and Deacon King King - and here he is calling his mother "Mommy". As I visualized him calling his mother Mommy, I saw a deep connection, an unusual intimacy between son and mother and the raw emotion of a man who loved his mother enough to write a 300 page book about her. That is love. Love is this woman who lived in utter poverty in a housing project in the New York City borough of Queens with 12 children, whom she loved and protected and encouraged enough that all of them went to college. This was a family that hungered for food more often than not but never for love and never for church connections which sustained them in many ways.

The first letter of John is all about love. I mean that is all it is about - gospel love. I know you've heard this before, in fact, you may even have heard it from me, but in the Greek language there are three kinds of love: eros - erotic and romantic love; philos - love of wisdom such as in philosophy. But gospel love is always agape - sacrificial love, the way God loves us sacrificially and the moral imperative that we love others in that same way. In the time that John's epistles were written, Christians were being persecuted and as such lived on the margins of society. There is debate about the origins of these letters, whether or not they were written by John of Patmos or someone else in the Johannine community. There are disputes about the dates and there were even disputes about whether or not these letters should be included in the canon of the New Testament. But what cannot be disputed is that these letters and especially 1st John is all about love, sacrificial love, agape - the most powerful and impactful kind of love that has ever existed. Agape can be as simple as giving up a seat on a crowded bus or as profound as giving up a life to save another's. Agape has everything to do with knowing that there is no gain for the giver - no profit to be attained - no special recognition - no expectations. Agape requires formation - from church, from parents, from friends, from Christian communities steeped in Agape, communities such as Sojourners - it is not something with which we are born; it is not usually in our DNA. I mean when did you ever encounter a baby that does not demand satisfaction of their every need. "Excuse me - would you like to share my bottle OR my mommy." I don't think so. But even very young children can learn to share and to give - agape can be woven into the tiniest practices of a young child. I remember the young children in my former congregation rolling up a red wagon to the altar - full of food for the food bank - food to be blessed before being distributed. Agape.

In his wonderful book “Love is the Way”, our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry writes that Love is all around us. It is in nature - in the ocean, the tress, the sky, the mountains, as well as in people. This book became available right in the middle of the worst of the pandemic sometime in late 2020. It was a balm for my struggling soul. I read quite a number of books last year having to do with racial reckoning and reconciliation. As I delved into this history, I marveled at the ways in which slaves helped each other, the secret language of song, the furtive signals, accompanying others on the Underground Railroad through dark swamps and unknown trails. Agape - agape through and through. Harriet Tubman didn't just help her family, she helped strangers, old and young, frail and strong. She may not have known their history or even their real names - but she still showed them the way. The prophets then and the prophets now.

Bishop Curry's writing and thinking about love goes far beyond this new book or any of his other books. In fact love, the notion of sacrificial love has shaped his whole ministry as our Presiding Bishop. He has been the driving force behind this idea of Becoming the Beloved Community which, comes right out of today's epistle. As voted on by our General Convention, long term commitment to racial healing, reconciliation and justice is couched in the overcall call to Become the Beloved Community in ways that are deeply rooted in this reading from John's first letter as well as the baptismal covenant: resisting evil, proclaiming by word and example the Good News of God in Christ, seeking and serving Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves, striving for justice and peace. All of these very daunting promises that we make every time we renew our baptismal covenant help us to be accountable to God and to ourselves.

I have struggled this past year with maintaining a sense of hope given what was happening with the dual pandemics. Yes, I have struggled with a lot of things around the pandemic but in particular, it was the refusal of so many people to wear masks. It was such a blatant defiance of looking out for the common good. It was a blatant defiance of sacrificial love. I know I'm not alone and yet and YET we are called to love - called to love those who test and try us the most. If we let the river of rage run through our lives, then we drown in it. We have to try to love. This is not sappy love full of happy hugs, love and kisses. This love that can be grinding and grueling: the kind of love that allows us to love the shooters, the greedy, the people who rape and pillage our beloved fragile earth. But why - why bother - why do something that seems ridiculous in so many ways. We love in this way because God calls us to do so, in fact God commands us to. One of the most challenging lines in this short passage of scripture is the line that says: Those who say “I love God” and hate their brothers or sisters are liars.” And my friends, brothers and sisters are not just those who are easy to love - it is everyone.

Fear is crippling. It robs us the ability to love; in fact fear as the beloved disciple tells us is the opposite of love. I have felt the crippling of fear - when one of my closest childhood friends got both pancreatic cancer and COVID, and when others near to me did that dance with near death. Yes, the past few months have resulted in deep

seated personal fear. And then there is the fear for other people such as the dire circumstances in India as thousands die daily from the virus. But I also know that when I sit with my fear, when I hold it in my heart, it starts to dissipate. This is not some sort of power of positive thinking, this is not shoving feelings inside. This is gospel love. The fear that only vanishes when we confront it and replace it with love.

Now 2020 and much of 2021 have been full of fear for many in this fragile world of ours. Fear drove hoarding - remember the shelves being depleted because of fear. Ah, the sacred toilet paper. Enough was not enough as it turned out. And then there was the fear of the virus itself. And for good reason, as we contend with over 3 million deaths world wide. So many things to stir up fear but when that fear is wrestled down by love, it starts to dissipate.

That is the way of love; love is the way. As the author of the epistle writes: "Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another." The words seem simple enough. The journey of love is demanding but the rewards are eternal. I'd like to leave you with the final section of a poem by the writer Merrit Malloy, a poem that is often read at funerals and celebrations of life.

"Epitaph" by Merrit Malloy

Love doesn't die

People do

So, when all that's left of me is love,

Give me away