



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by  
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## Saying I Love You

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, October 26, 2014  
The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Matthew 22:34-46*

For some reason this week the gospel lesson had little appeal to me as a piece of ancient literature. The first half of the passage is so familiar that it lives in our cultural lexicon; everyone has heard over and over the commandment to love God with all our heart, soul and mind. The second half about Messiahship is so abstruse that there is no convincing consensus about its meaning, and pondering it seems rather meaningless. So I took a different tack this week. Reading the passage primarily devotionally, I have tried, really tried, to imagine what it means for me to love God with all my heart, soul and mind—never mind trying to actually do it. I will give that a whirl another week. Even contemplating, though, the possibility of imagining what such a commandment means has not been easy. I had trouble staying focused, finding myself wandering off into a million different distractions, not frivolous things—not most of them anyway—but important things to me and to my little world. And then I would try to snap myself back into the contemplation at hand, only to start the whole process again.

I am not saying all this to be self-effacing but truly to ask you to think with me for a few minutes about what it really means to love God. Almost every prayer I pray and certainly every one I write begins with the salutation, "Loving God," followed then usually with an intercession of one kind or another. Those words, "Loving God," come easily to me as a way of approaching the Divine. In fact, they encapsulate my theology of God, claiming all that is important in what I believe about God: God is love; God *is* love.

So I began to think about the process of declaring love. Interestingly, it is not hard for me to tell those dearest to me that I love them. I say those three words, "I love you," so often to my beloved and family that I have asked myself if the words are so automatic as to be meaningless. And the answer is that they are not. Despite the fact that each one of them can and does drive me nuts (well, not my grandchildren, who are quite extraordinary), I love them, each of them, this tiny circle of inner family, with all my heart, soul and mind. I don't spend a great deal of time imagining what that means, but I tell them over and over. And I know it is true.

But something has called me up short this week as I engaged this passage in hopes of writing a sensible sermon about it. I have been forced to admit that I rarely, which is to say never, say in my prayers, "God, I love you." I wasn't sure that I wanted to share that; and at this moment I am a bit sorry that I did. The temptation is to ask for a show of hands to see if I am alone in this, but I am way too smart to take that risk.

My prayers are filled with thanksgiving, always thanking God for so many things. I even thank God without knowing whether God had anything to do with the thing for which I am feeling thankful, gleefully going with the inclination to say, "Thank you, God." It seems crazy not to. I don't believe God has anything to do with the subway schedule; but if a train arrives as I walk down the steps, I think, "Thank God."

My prayers also are filled with pleas for help—though, honestly, I don't pray for divine physical intervention; theologically I just can't go there, having had to admit a long time ago that for me it just doesn't work. But I am constantly praying, "Help, help, help—help me, help us, help the world, help." I don't have a clue about how it works or frankly often if it works, but I know that in the words of the old spiritual, "It's me, it's me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer." And understanding it or not, the words, "Help me, God," are never far from my heart.

And probably the most constant prayer I pray is, "Be present, God, for I don't think I can do this—any of this—another second without you." The constancy of that prayer is somewhat interesting because in my heart I believe an old saying that used to hang on my office wall and has somehow sadly been lost. The words on the hanging were, "Bidden or not, God is present." Isn't that wonderful? Whether we ask for God's presence or not, we are never

without it. In my book, that is worth everything in the world.

Praising God, particularly in public worship, is one of the ways we pray and arguably one of the most obvious ways we express our love of God. As all of you know, our liturgy is filled with praise, our beloved hymnody particularly. I can sing “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee” until I am blue in the face, but honestly I never think about saying to God, “I love you.” Sad perhaps, but certainly my truth.

It may be that Jesus (and perhaps the mystic Hillel before him, who also said these words) understood that we probably need a second step, a more embodied option, an earthly way for us to live out this greatest commandment. In the older language, the scripture after stating the first part of the Great Commandment says, “And the second *is* like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” What a relief! I am not great at that either, but at least I get it. I know sort of what it means to love myself, and I particularly know how desperately dreadful it is not to love myself, when I am just unable to. I also know sort of what it means to love my neighbor, which I categorically do not always do but at least have some sense of what it might entail. And the scripture is clear: This second part of the commandment is like the first—as critical and important as the first. That is what being “like it” means.

Could it be that for most of us loving God with all our heart, soul and mind is about loving ourselves first—which is not as easy as it sounds and is not the same thing as being narcissistic, which comes fairly easily—and then others as we come to love ourselves? Not being prepared to make claims about the ultimate truth of God, I am cautious here. But as we might say, wouldn’t it be just like God if that were true—to have created us in such a way that we really only love God when we begin to love those whom God has created, beginning with ourselves and then going from there?

Part of what may help us here is to distinguish between the feeling of love and the action of love. It is increasingly clear that I am going to fail at “feeling” love in a wide and inclusive way. With eight million people in New York City, with 7.9 million of them pushing and shoving, texting, talking and walking in front of me on the sidewalk at any given second, there is a low chance, that would be a zero percentage chance, that I am going to feel love for a good number of them! But I can, through the transforming love of God, find a way to “act” lovingly most of the time. And in the process of acting lovingly, over the course of a life journey in search of loving God, I might just be able eventually to say the words, “God, I love you.” The oddly comforting thought I have is that that piece of my transformation matters more to me than it does to God. In fact, I am betting on the assumption that God would be plenty happy if I got the second part down pat.

In the name of God, who *is* love: *Amen.*