



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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Mutual Love

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, May 22, 2022

The Sixth Sunday of Easter

Based on Acts 16:9-15; Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5; John 14:23-29

I want to preach this morning about LOVE. Not just the kind of love we seem to easily fall into and out of. The love that Jesus proclaimed was more like something we need to practice to get good at. The kind of love that in Jesus' case—and for others throughout history—required laying down his life for his friends.

Today's readings also compel us to think about mutuality, the mutuality of love: God's love for us and the mutual love that we are called to be a part of in relation to all of creation. The mutuality of love: in creation, among people, and between God and humanity.

First, we need to understand that mutuality and equality are not the same thing. The word "equal" means "like or alike in quality, degree, value... of the same rank, ability, merit." There's a kind of quantitative exactness to being "equal." Which is why George Orwell's statement in *Animal Farm* that "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others" stands out for us as a contradiction in terms.

The word "mutual," however, means "possessed, experienced, performed by each of two or more with respect to the other or others." One might note immediately that some kind of *relationship* is necessarily involved when one uses the term "mutual." A synonym for "mutual" is "reciprocal," meaning "a relation in which one act, thing, feeling, balances or is given in return for another." Four quarters equals one dollar. But I might be more than willing to accept three quarters from you in exchange for my one dollar bill if I'm in a hurry to put money in the meter and I need exact change. The transaction, while not entirely *equal*, was *mutual*—and you benefit by being 25 cents richer!

What is important here is to recognize that a relationship doesn't have to be equal in order to manifest mutual love. Humanity and non-human creation are not equal, but there are certainly ways in which each can benefit the other. An adult and a child are not, in most respects, equal; but there can be mutual love in the relationship. Humanity and God are not equal, but we are called into mutual love by our Creator.

How does mutual love in creation work? René Dubos, who lived from 1901-1982 and was a well-known bacteriologist and Pulitzer Prize winner, wrote about "Symbiosis between the Land and Humankind." "Symbiosis" is a word that comes out of the world of biology and refers to "the living together of two species of organisms: a term usually restricted to cases in which the union of two animals or plants is not disadvantageous to either, or is advantageous or necessary to both." Dubos wrote that "Symbiotic relationships mean creative partnerships. The earth is to be seen neither as an ecosystem to be preserved unchanged nor as a quarry to be exploited for selfish and short-range economic reasons, but as a garden to be cultivated for the development of its own potentialities of the human adventure. The goal of this relationship is not the maintenance of the status quo, but the emergence of new phenomena and new values."

Humankind and all the rest of God's creation—plants and animals, rocks and minerals, sun, moon, and stars—exist in relation to each other. The degree to which this relationship—or perhaps more accurately this *complexity* of relationships— is *mutual* is truly a question. But it is when we begin to see, for example, that toxic waste is not only injurious to the earth, but also to our own health; it is when we begin to understand that we can no longer eat the fruits of the earth when they are from polluted lands or oceans; it is when we begin to see the *dependence* of humanity not only on God but also on God's essentially good creation that we finally begin to see the need to practice the world of love with respect to the earth. Practicing love with respect to the earth and its creatures means more than participating in the local recycling efforts. It means working on what may be a wholly new attitude toward and respect for all forms of life, including their diversity, their interconnectedness, and their value as sacred parts of God's creation. The earth has yielded freely of her bounty and beauty to humankind for thousands of years. While we have cultivated the earth in a caring manner in part, we have also abused her in selfish and greedy ways. God's call to mutual love means that we must do away with abuse of the earth and work to cultivate the creative partnerships of mutual love.

In exploring mutual love among people, I want to use as an example the relationship between adults and children, precisely because the relationship is so blatantly *unequal*. In the October, 1990, issue of *Smithsonian* magazine, there was an article titled "Winsome, weird and wonderful—art made by children." The pictures in the article were stunning. There were colored paintings and drawings by children and teenagers from various nations: Norway, Turkey, Albania, Argentina, France. They were simply stunning. Their power lay not in their artistic perfection or in the training they reflected, but in what they expressed: a tremendous range of emotions on the part of these children-artists.

The text of the article was about a children's museum in Oslo, Norway, the only one of its kind. The museum's curator is a man named Rafael Goldin. Goldin had this to say to the readers: "To respect children is very important. This, people don't understand. Children may not be able to speak to us in our language. But language is wonderful. What they express is a stage in our lives that we can't return to, and at the very moment they experience it." Goldin leaves no doubt in the readers' minds that mutuality, or respect, is the dynamic at work in this cultural endeavor: children expressing their deepest feelings from their own experience, telling us what childhood is through their hands, if only we who are adults will listen and look.

And what of you and me, Christian worshipers who long to express our deepest feelings during this sacred hour every week? Do we have the opportunity to really do that? Is the love that we have for each other in this atmosphere of common prayer anything like the love described in the Fourth Gospel: "I have called you friends for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. This I command you, to love one another"? Do the words of the second reading strike a familiar chord: "Let us love one another, for love is of God..." ?

There is a very real connection between loving people and being able to tell them how we feel about many things—and hearing how they feel. Then there can be genuine affection. Children are not the only people who have a language of their own. We all do. But each of our languages needs to be spoken and heard. And too often, they are not. Practicing the world of mutual love among people—whether adult with adult, adult with child, or child with child—requires respect, listening, looking, and sharing. "If we love one another, God abides in us, and God's love is perfected in us."

What about the mutual love between God and humanity? Sometimes I think this is the hardest kind of mutual love to get a hold of or to practice, in part because we try to make God so distant or because we don't know how to describe how we experience God. For me, it was a child in a novel that provided my own spiritual awakening to God's love.

In John Galsworthy's novel *The Forsyte Saga*, there is a scene in which the entire family has gathered to bury the much-beloved dog, Balthasar. A young boy is there, puzzled about death and wondering about the God of whom he has heard very little in the family circle. "Do you believe in God?" he asks his father. "Of course," the father replies, "if by God one means the power which is behind everything that exists, or if by God one means the sum of human goodness." "That leaves out Christ, doesn't it?" the son perceptively replies.

The son in the story reminds us that the center and focus of the Christian faith is not a creed, or a doctrine, or even a well-thought-out systematic theology of life. The center and focus of the Christian faith is a person, Jesus, the Christ, and that person's relationship to each and all of us, his disciples. God spoke to us through Jesus, in a language we could all understand: the language of human relationship. And what Jesus says about that relationship is, "No longer do I call you servants ... but I have called you friends... I chose you... love one another as I have loved you... abide in my love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full. Greater love has no one than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." And he practiced what he preached.

So, three areas of mutual love: mutual love in creation, mutual love among people, and mutual love between God and humanity. We can practice the work of mutual love by respecting and valuing all parts of creation as sacred and by working against the abuse of the earth. We can practice the work of mutual love in the words of our own baptismal covenant: "striving for justice and peace among all people, and respecting the dignity of every human being." And we can practice the world of mutual love by loving one another as Jesus did: by advocating on behalf of the poor and oppressed, by healing the sick, by comforting those who mourn, by feeding the hungry and clothing the naked, and—yes, if need be—by laying down our lives for our friends. Because God is LOVE, and "nothing shall separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord."

Amen.

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