

Mother's Day Reflections on Love

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Today is a day when we focus on love. It's in the Scriptures. It's in the special character of the day, the women we honor, the breakfast we serve. It's in the air, over the airwaves, on television, in the movies. A 1955 classic told us that *Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing*. If that's a bit too vague for you, Ryan O'Neal and Ali MacGraw told us that "*love means never having to say you're sorry*" in their 1970 production of *Love Story*. If you've lived in real relationships striving to discover your own love story, then, like me, you probably know that love means always having to say you're sorry, and never saying I'm sorry enough! Pithy one-liners defining the meaning of love abound – in poems, on cards, in songs and scripture. Robert Burns wrote, "*Take away love, and our earth is a tomb.*" Elizabeth Browning proposed "*Love may not make the world go round, but it sure makes the ride worthwhile.*" Here's a longer musing by Robert Ingersoll, telling us that love "*is the Morning and the Evening Star. It shines upon the cradle of the babe, and sheds its radiance upon the quiet tomb. It is the Mother of Art, inspirer of poet, patriot, and philosopher. It is the air and light of every heart, builder of every home, kindler of every fire on every hearth. It was the first to dream of immortality. It fills the world with melody..... Love is the magician, the enchanter.... It is the perfume of the wondrous flower – the human heart. Without it, we are less than beasts; but with it, earth is heaven, and we are like the gods.*" In a much simpler poetic expression, Robert Heinline writes, "*Love is the most human condition in which the happiness of another is essential to your own.*"

Here's how Mother Theresa put it: "*If you judge people, you have no time to love them.*" She had a very practical bent, kind of like St. Francis of Assisi, who focused on doing. "*You learn to study by studying, to serve by serving, to care by caring, and to love by loving.*" Jesus used images. "*There is no greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.*" (John 15:12) That image began with the image we find in today's Gospel, with Jesus being the vine, the conduit, the elaborate vehicle and vessel for translating love from its source to its fruit. "*Just as the branch cannot bear fruit unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit.*" All this abiding is about one thing, love, God's love, God's love in us, God's love through us. "*As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Abide in my love.* In our Second Lesson, John reduces the whole of our knowledge of God to our experience of love. "*Beloved, let us love one another, because love is of God: everyone who loves is born of God and knows God, for God is love.*" It seems simple enough; but as I've been saying for several weeks now, it is not our experience of love that tells us what we need to know about who God is, it is our experience of God that tell us what we need to know about what love is.

John's Gospel and John's Epistle are on the same page in this regard. Love is not a four-letter word that stands alone; it needs a story, the story of Jesus' life and death. When John writes, "*God's love was revealed in this way*", he is trying to tell us what love looks like by telling a

love story. It is not the story of Romeo and Juliet, or Charles and Diana, or Brad and Angelina, or Brad and Jennifer Aniston before that, all stories that ended badly for love. The love story that John tells us is about God's love, true love, a love that lasts, a love that grows stronger through life's trials we endure and the challenges we overcome. The story John tells is this: "God sent his Son into the world that we might find life through his love." In other words, if we are going to think of God and love in the same breath, then let the secret of that love be found in the story of Jesus' life. It's that simple, and that complicated. The other Gospels call it discipleship, learning about God's love by following the story, not just the story on the page, but the story of Jesus' life, looking at the love he lived, and letting the love we see in his life live in ours.

I could make it more complicated. I read a lot about God's love while at Notre Dame. One of the many books I read on the subject was written by Fr. Robert Johann, a Jesuit from Fordham, who wrote a book on the essence of love, which was subtitled *The Metaphysics of Intersubjectivity*. Sounds like quite a read! I know what Johann was trying to do. His desire was to recapture the genius of St. Thomas Aquinas, to rescue his classic insights from the legalistic framework of medieval Roman Catholic Scholasticism, and allow a new, improved Thomism to do justice to our modern fascination with love. Nothing like a little metaphysics to drain the life out of something that could be interesting. I know that's what some of you think I do from the pulpit, draining the life out of what could be interesting by turning it into a boring sermon. But I've got news for you. That is not my job. I just do it for the fun of it! But it does challenge us to reconsider what we have to do to understand what the essence of God's love looks like, and what it means to live the love God gives. If demonstrating real understanding means passing a test in the classroom about the meaning of love as expressed through the metaphysics of intersubjectivity, then I could pass that test hands down, as I've done time and again. But Jesus seems to have another test in mind. "*There is no greater love than this, that one lay down one's life for one's friends.*" Now that's a test you can only pass once if at all, unless you're a cat with nine lives to give, or Clint Eastwood in a *Spaghetti Western*. But this is not Planet Hollywood. It's real life on planet earth, and the love that offers true life is God's, and the life that offers true love is the life that Jesus gives that all might find true life through his love.

We learn these lessons and pass these tests by allowing our trust in God's perfect love to cast out all fear, replacing panic with peace, as 1st John 4:18 promises. That's something that happens here among us more often than we might imagine. Several weeks ago, in a sermon entitled *Peace and Love, Not Just a 70's Slogan*, I recounted an encounter Gregg Evanoff had with the mystery of God's love, passing the test of trusting that love with his life, with death knocking at the door, as he was marked by the miracle of peace replacing panic on the way to Mercy Medical Center's Coronary Care Unit. The truth of the matter is that God's love is alive in the lives of people we know, among those folks sitting next to us in the pew, and in our own lives, too. You will find this love told through the many stories that fill all fifty-two pages of our *Lenten Devotional Guide*. It's what we celebrate today in our texts, through our singing, with the Mother's Day Breakfast. The love God gives is real; it is active among us, and making a difference every day in every way among those who sit alongside of us, who join us in serving, and help us in living and loving ... in Jesus' name. Amen