

“Some Last Words about Love”

John 15:9-17, Acts 10:44-48; Easter 6-B, May 10, 2015

I like the true story I read recently about the Rev. Dr. Timothy Smith, a senior pastor currently serving the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in Atlanta, Georgia. Pastor Smith recently confessed in a sermon of his, that when he was a much younger, whippersnapper of a pastor, fresh out of the seminary, that he was actually much more a “liturgical and musical snob” back then than he is today.

Pastor Smith had a great tendency to highly extol the great hymns of the Lutheran Church, while looking down his nose at some of those hymns that Christians in other traditions often regarded as the “Great Gospel Hymns” of the Church. One hymn that he really didn’t care for at all was that hymn entitled: “In the Garden,” and he would sometimes even make snide comments about it while teaching a Bible class, perhaps, at the first little rural parish that he served in North Carolina. He would ask: “Why would any Christian, whose biblical faith values “community” far above “individualism;” ever want to sing a hymn like that? And then he would quote the words of that hymn: “He walks with me and he talks with me, and he tells me that I am his own, and the love we share as we tarry there, none other has ever known!”?

Then one day a Southern Baptist pastor, a friend of his actually, he said, knocked him off of his high horse by pointing out to them that the words of the most-loved psalm in all the world, Psalm 23, also seems to exalt the faith of an individual over the faith of the Christian community as a whole. There are first person personal pronouns used all throughout that text: *“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside the still waters,”* and so on.

“Touché” Pastor Smith said! And it was very shortly after this, while he was still serving his first little rural parish in North Carolina that the family of an elderly gentleman in that that church summoned him to the hospital because their father was obviously struggling to hold on to his life, in what doctors told the family were now obviously the last hours of his life.

Pastor Smith rushed to the hospital and then waited for all of his adult children to arrive there. Then he and all the family gathered around this elderly gentleman’s bed and Pastor Smith led them all in prayer, praying for this man’s peaceful passing.

In response to the pastor’s prayer, that’s when this dear old salt-of-the-earth farmer mustered up enough strength to open his eyes, to look up at Pastor Smith and smile, and then said his very last words: “I love every one of you and I you too Pastor Tim, and I have always enjoyed your singing so much, that I want you to sing “In the Garden” at my funeral!

That’s precisely when this elderly gentleman of a farmer flat-lined on the monitor! He closed his eyes and died! After which, the deceased man’s oldest son looked up at him and said: “Thank you, Pastor! Daddy always loved that song!”

And in that same sermon Pastor Smith was sharing about “last words” this is when he told his congregation he came to believe that God certainly must have a sense of humor!

In the words of our Gospel lesson this morning, we are hearing some of Jesus’ “last words about love” to his disciples, on the night before he willingly went to the cross to suffer and to die there, to reconcile sinners like me and like you to his Heavenly Father.

“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you! Abide in my love! If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love!”

How had the Father shown his love to his Son Jesus? Wasn't it chiefly shown in the Son's constant awareness of Heavenly Father's own deep and abiding presence in his life, and through that extremely vital relationship which the Father and the Son always shared with each other; as some young people, still like to say, 24-7; that is, 24 hours a day and 7 days a week!?!

You might remember that shortly after Jesus had that conversation with the woman at the well of Samaria that completely changed her whole life (4th chapter of John's Gospel), that the disciples had returned, as we learn in verse 8, from having gone away into the city to buy food for themselves and no doubt also for Jesus, that the disciples come up to Jesus and they "urge" him the text tells us, saying: "*Rabbi, eat!*" *But Jesus responded to their command by saying, "I have food to eat that you do not know about!" So the disciples then said to one another, "Has anyone brought him something to eat?" Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work!" (John 4:31-34)*

Jesus constantly enjoyed a very close and intimate relationship with God his Father all throughout his life. This is why he said repeatedly, "*The words that I speak to you are not my words, but the words of him who sent me! I have not come to do my will, but the will of my Father in heaven*" (John 14:24; John 6:38)

Just as Jesus was constantly living with an awareness of the great love that his heavenly Father always had for him, so it is possible for you and me to live today with that same awareness.

And yet we all it is also possible for human beings to go throughout their whole lives here on earth without being mindful of God the Father's love, or Christ's love for them at all! By nature we are all separated from God, and yet Jesus came into this world to put us back into a right relationship with his Father through his great work of Redemption—which is really what it means to "*be saved*" and to be in possession of eternal life, already now, today, and all throughout eternity!

If we think about Jesus' last words to us on love, one of the great truths that comes out here is that:

(1) The love Christ calls upon us to share with others goes way beyond the Golden Rule, even though it was Jesus who shares with us what we have come to know as "The Golden Rule," earlier in his ministry in his Sermon on the Mount, when he says in Matthew 7:21, "*So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the prophets!*"

And yet already in chapter 5, Jesus calls us to a higher form of love, when he says: *So in everything, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your father who is in heaven.*

For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same!" (Matthew 5:43-47)

(2). Secondly the love Christ gives to us to share with others is also sacrificial!

"This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this that someone lays down his life for his friends!" (Vv. 12-13)

Today is Mothers' Day and today is one of the most important days, many people believe, in our country, when it comes to celebrating love! And I think it is very tempting for many pastors like me to stand up in a pulpit like this one today and seek to paint for his congregation a glorious picture of "motherhood," while waxing eloquently on all the great virtues of a Christian mother and her devoted Christian children.

For many years on Mother's Day it was vogue for many preachers in the United States to use as their text some of those great words found in Proverbs 31, where King Solomon, a very wise man, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, one day wrote: "*An excellent wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels. The heart of her*

husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain! She looks well to the ways of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness. Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her, saying: "May women have done excellently, but (you my dear) surpass them all!" (Proverbs 31:10-11,27-29).

But fortunately today I think most pastors are willing to be a little bit more realistic than that! Yes, many of us enjoyed watching as children on television those wonderful family programs like "Leave It to Beaver," or "The Waltons," or "The Little House on the Prairie," but such pictures of such an idyllic family life are usually not reality for most people, unless you are the Duggers, who are blessed, on TV, it always seems with perfectly polite and courteous children; all 19 of them!

Jesus reminds us that the kind of love he has for us is very much a sacrificial kind of love, and many people have given their lives in constant devotion to their children, even as there are those children today who give their lives in constant devotion to their parents, especially in their later years, as so many of you have done, and some of you are still doing today!

Did you hear that story about a woman who telephoned a friend the other day and asked her friend how she was feeling?

"Terrible" came the reply over the telephone line! "I have a splitting headache and my back and my legs are killing me. The house is a mess, and the kids are simply driving me crazy!"

Very sympathetically the caller said, "Listen, you go upstairs and lie down! I'll come over right away and cook lunch for you and clean up your house for you! I'll take care of the children for you, while you get some rest! By the way, how is your husband Sam?"

"Sam," the complaining mother on the other end of the line questioned. "My husband's name isn't Sam!"

"Oh dear," exclaimed the first woman, "I must have dialed the wrong number!"

Then there was a long pause, and the troubled woman said, "Does this mean that you're not actually coming over?"

That housewife had hoped she had found a friend; you know, someone who might actually be there for her to help her out on a bad day like the one she was having! Someone who would truly be there for her in her hour of need!

(3) Christ's love that he gives to us to share with one another has no racial boundaries! This is certainly a great truth that I see coming across to me in the words of our first lesson today!

Pastors get surprises sometimes. Some are pleasant surprises; some are not so pleasant. And some surprises turn your whole world upside down. Our lesson today from Acts 10 is about a surprise that turned the world upside down for Peter and for the early church.

Up until the time of today's first lesson in Acts 10:34-48, Christianity had for the most part been a Jewish sect. Samaritans were welcome, for they were regarded as half-Jews. But, before Philip baptized the Ethiopian eunuch, as we heard last Sunday from Acts 8, no Gentiles had been welcomed into the fraternity. And the Ethiopian's baptism took place out in the wilderness, far from Jerusalem. Who would even know?

Through a wonderful series of events that all took place within the short spans of a few days, God convinced Simon Peter that the Gospel should be preached to Gentiles too, and that those who come to faith are then eligible to be baptized into the Church as well!

After a series of event took place that led Peter to this conclusion, that's when he stands up and shares those remarkable words with us that are included in the first lesson from Acts 10 today:

"Peter opened his mouth and said, 'Truly I now understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good

news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is LORD of all), you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: How God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.

And we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. To him, all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name!

While Peter was still speaking these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word! And the believers among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God! Then Peter declared, "Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit, just as we have?"

And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days!" (Acts 10:34-43). Amen