



1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8
Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (April 28, 2024)

The theme of love continues in today's selection from the First Letter of John. "God is Love," the author says.¹ The two words (God and Love) are interchangeable. We know God when we experience love, and we practice love if we know God. No other way around it. "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love." (1 John 4:8-9)

It's not that we love once we know God. We love even *before* we have an awareness of God, but it is God who gives the ability to love. God reaches out to us in so many ways (the love of our parents first; the love of our siblings, spouses, children, pets) and then God allows us to discover the origin of that love and be surprised by the immensity of God's love manifested in its perfection in Christ's love for us.

We remain awestruck and we soon learn that the only way to know God is by noticing God at work: Love made visible in us, in our loving one another. We commit to that love because we want to have more of it: we want more of the joy that springs up when we are in God.

Talking about love...

¹ 1 John 4:8,16,19

A man declared: "My wife told me she loves me more than anything in the world. I said, "I love you too. What about pizza?" She said, "Okay, fine. More than anything except pizza."

This is when she realized they needed counseling. He went fishing. She went to a women's seminar on how to live in a loving relationship with their husbands.

The women were asked, "How many of you love your husband?" All the women raised their hands.

Then they were asked, "When was the last time you told your husband you loved him?" Some women answered "Today," a few "Yesterday," and some couldn't remember. The women were then told to take out their cell phones and text their husband: "I love you, sweetheart."

Next the women were instructed to exchange phones with another woman and read aloud the text message they received in response to their message.

Here are the replies.

1. Yeah, and I love you too. What's wrong?
2. I don't understand what you mean?
3. What did you do now?
4. Don't beat about the bush, just tell me how much you need?
5. Tell me who this message is actually for, or someone will die.
6. Your mother is coming to stay with us, isn't she?

The most extraordinary discovery of all is that **God wants to abide in us and make that Love perfectly visible in us**. This is mind-blowing: God's sacrificial love wants to find its completion in us; God wants to carry out God's creative power in us; God's purpose moves through us!

And we learn that we don't know how to let God be God. Our love is limited and imperfect. **We can love and make a difference only if God's Spirit is in us** (1 John 4:13). It's God's Spirit in us that prompts us to love even when we'd rather turn around and walk away (and sometimes, we better to be safe). It's the same Spirit who points out to us our bias and judgments, our resistance and indifference. In the words of St. Paul, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate."²

Even when we mean well, our words and our actions and at times our inaction, communicate other than what is intended. Sometimes, our careless words and actions as well as our energy and attitude may come across hurtful and leave marks in people.

We don't love in a vacuum. When we love, we carry with us our own story made of joys and sorrows, hopes and disappointments, and encounter people also dealing with their own grief and longings.

We certainly make **a mockery of Love** when we restrict the flow of Love or are selective about "worthy" of our love: we make demands of others before we love them. "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those

² Romans 7:15

who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.” (1 John 4:20)

Thus, it is evident that just because God abides in us and we in God and we try to love others it does not mean that our love is “perfect.” But it is “*perfected*,” that is, it is in the process of being made perfect (1 John 4:12). God wants to render our love perfect. There is no need to be discouraged.

Mother Theresa once said: “Love is a fruit in season at all times, and within reach of every hand. Anyone may gather it and no limit is set. Everyone can reach this love through meditation, spirit of prayer, and sacrifice, by an intense interior life”³

All have access to Love. We all can see Love and experience Love. We all can offer Love. The more we surrender to it the more we have of it.

“God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.” (1 John 4:16).

But the purpose of this abiding is not passive (as in a protective state) and not for pious contemplation of God (as in self-serving or *feeling* good exercise). God in us and we in God is for the purpose of an **interactive bond** and **shared mission**. God wants our eyes set on God (and scanning reality) and our hearts on fire for the intention of caring for one another, preserving nature, promoting good will, spreading kingdom values, and impacting those oppressed by injustice.

Today’s gospel passage is part of Jesus’ farewell discourse to his disciples, and the metaphor of vinedresser, vine, and branches

³ Mother Teresa, Love: A Fruit Always in Season

provides instruction for the time soon to come when Jesus will no longer be physically present with his community.

“Abide in me as I abide in you.” These words hold both **promise** and **invitation**. The promise is that Jesus will continue to provide sustenance through the life-giving presence of the Spirit. Set before his disciples, then, is an invitation to abide in this assured continued sustenance, and to produce fruit in turn.

Fruitful or not, **pruning will come**. Suffering is part of the Christian life, both of the maturing process and the public witness. But suffering does not have an end in itself. God’s *pruning is not meant as a punishment*. A vinedresser’s pruning is for the purpose of letting the sun through and allowing the vine to produce more fruit. Suffering for the purpose of Love, Justice, and Truth takes on a redemptive meaning.

We cannot deal with hard topics without making hard choices. Whether in marriage or in society, be it an ecclesial community or any other grouping, we are challenged to possibly keep the bond together at a personal sacrifice (opt for cautious self-restraint or go the generous extra mile) or creatively and respectfully engage in conversations for the sake of truth and justice. What’s the cost of peace at any cost? Who is paying?

Abiding in God’s love, we are **equipped** and **freed** to love one another. It is Jesus’ ongoing love for his disciples that frees us to love one another in his name. Sometimes, our love is slow and messy and it’s hard to see and recognize the fruit. Sometimes, we can be impatient with ourselves and with others, and don’t *feel* any positive and spiritual growth happening in us. We might not feel it, and we might not totally understand what is happening, but all of it still counts as drawing near to Jesus.

Every time we show up to do the work of ministry and loving other people, even and especially when we don't feel like it, we are docile and learn from Jesus. We lean into the trust that God will do God's work in and through us, and we will bear good fruit at the proper time.⁴ This is how we are pruned into shape. And this is how we glorify God.

May the divine vinedresser, who wants us to abide and to abound, sustain and transform us in love. Amen.

⁴ John 15:5; Philippians 2:12-13; 2 Corinthians 3:4-6