

There is a story attributed to Jerome, 4th century early church father, that he told about John the Evangelist, who Jerome and others in the early Church believed was the author of the Gospel of John, the book of Revelation, and the epistles of John. The story goes this way. John the Evangelist lived in Ephesus, and preached at the church in Ephesus long into his 90's (I promise not to be here that long!). Yet, once he hit 90, he had become so feeble that he had to be carried into the church on a stretcher. When he could no longer preach a regular sermon, he would lean up on one arm and say, "little children, love one another." People would then hoist up the stretcher, and carry him back out of the church. Apparently, this stretcher/sermon routine went on, week after week after week. Eventually, his parishioners, weary of this repetition, finally asked John: Master, WHY do you always say the same thing, over and over again?" to which John replied, "Love one another is the Lord's command, and if this alone is done, it is enough."

The older I get, the more I value simplicity. Love one another. Period. Yet, like anything else in life, it is not as simple as it seems. Or at least we make it more complicated than it should be. We humans are built for relationship. We are connected. Yet, we so easily construct obstacles-divisions-to keep ourselves apart. We sequester ourselves: by skin color, ethnicity, political values, theological beliefs, nationality, and in countless other ways. While we seem hardwired to be IN relationship, we also seem to be hardwired to distance ourselves from one another. Surely that disparity is a part of the brokenness that Jesus meant to help us heal. His call to love one another might be prefaced by something like this: in spite of your inclination to mess up human connection in endless ways, I want you to figure out how to love one another. And isn't that what we seem to do-from birth to death: to keep working at figuring out what it means to love one another?

We know the lengths Jesus went to to show us about this path of love: death on a cross. It is important to note-today's Gospel lesson is sandwiched in between two critical encounters with two of his disciples. The first, after an exchange between Jesus and Judas, has Judas leaving the room to arrange the arrest of Jesus. The second is when Jesus tells Peter that he will betray Jesus, not once or twice, but three times. So, in between stories that epidomize the deep betrayal by beloved friends, Jesus tells his disciples the importance of loving one another. Clearly, the kind of love Jesus' describes is a radical one; one that has little to do with rosy sentiment or even the reliability of friendship. It is born out of self-giving, and the ability to see a bigger picture and it requires a very deep place from which Jesus must draw. I would

describe that place as one of resilience grounded in trust. And it is that very place-of resilience grounded in trust-that WE draw from when we love; and it is that same deep place within us that gains strength when we give love away. Perhaps it is that place that the ancients called: soul. It is where our spirits are tangled up with the divine-and it is that very core that we feed and nurture when we pray, when we laugh, when we explore the enormous gift that being human, and loving, has to offer.

When I think about this call-to love one another-I think about the many layers of love that exist. We experience God's love in community. I see it in our midst, here at St. Augustine's-at Feed a Friend, at yard sales or the hours spent together in preparation for the Christmas Fair, in the tenderness of sharing each other's burdens, in the laying on of hands when someone is about to experience something big or challenging, in the sheer joy of moments of unbridled laughter, in having the courage to try something new-knowing that people here have your back, in the expansive Prayers of the People (I couldn't believe-my first Sunday-how much people pray out loud here), and yes...in the expansive exchange of the peace, which sometimes feels like forever, in cooking casseroles for people who are healing and sending cards to give support and thanks, in the exuberance and curiosity of our very small gaggle of young people, in the gift of our URI community, in the collecting and handing out of food, in the shining of brass and the baking of bread...to name just a very few. I recently had to put my elder dog, Buffy, to sleep, and I was so buoyed by the support I received from all of you. Community, at its best, teaches us about who God is, and what God's love is all about.

Another layer is what I would call tough love: when, out of our affection and care for one another, we speak the truth to another, in hopes of facilitating healing and wholeness. As you all have heard me mention, my mom lived with me for 8 years. We had always been close, but living together was an unexpected challenge. We had a fiery and sweet love. We seemed to easily press each other's buttons, yet at the same time, our relationship was steeped in deep love and affection. After 8 years, and frankly my mom no longer being safe to be on her own for many hours during my work day, I had to say to her and to my brother and my sister: I think we need to come up with a new plan. This decision came from a place of love, but it was one of the toughest family conversations I have ever had. It required risk, and courage and trust. Speaking the truth in love is never easy-but it often is one of the most magnificent ways of loving.

Self-giving or sacrificial love is yet another layer of love's onion. Like Jesus, we are called to give ourselves away. We serve. And we do it from a place of grace- a place of humility- a place of recognition that everything we have is a gift, and not to be held onto. Marge Piercy has a wonderful poem called "To Have Without Holding" . It starts like this: Learning to love differently is hard, Love with the hands wide open, love With the doors banging on their hinges, the cupboard unlocked, the wind Roaring and whimpering

The gifts that we have been given are meant to be held with open hands. And gratitude is at the center, at the heart, of our service. As is sorrow-for it also takes loss for us to know how very much we have. Ultimately, we do it- we give ourselves away-because we are loved...and we know that at the very core of our being. Many of us are involved in various acts of service-be they regular volunteering gigs, or random acts of kindness. What I know is true is that when we give ourselves away, our lives are profoundly enriched. And our connections with one another are deepened. The "us and them" begins to fade into the recognition that we really are all a part of one very large, diverse, and rich human family.

Wangari Maathai, a distinguished and electric Kenyan woman biologist now deceased , won the Nobel Peace Prize some years ago for her tree planting projects that restored forests in her beloved Kenya-a project that not only helped bring back the forest, but also restored hope. She tells the following story. " A big fire was destroying the forest. All the animals fled, except the hummingbird. It flew to the river, picked up one drop of water in its tiny beak, flew back, and poured that drop on the fire. Again and again, it returned to the river, each time scooping up a single drop and pouring it on the fire. The other animals watched from the far shore, laughing and mocking the hummingbird. The harder they laughed, the harder the hummingbird worked. "Just what do you think you're doing" the animals asked. Without stopping her work, the little bird answered calmly-"I'm doing what I can."

We, also, do what we can. Little by little. One act at a time. We are made for love. And, in the end, maybe we DO make it too complicated. Little ones, love one another. Like John the Evangelist, maybe I should have left it at that. AMEN

