

The First Sunday after Trinity

1 John 4:16-21: "A Living Faith Is Active in Love."

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In Nomine Iesu

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O Lord, we have loved neither You nor our neighbor as we should. But You have loved us with a perfect love, and in Your love You sent Your holy Son to atone for our sins. Send the Holy Spirit through Your Word that we may grow in faith toward You and in fervent love toward one another. In Jesus' name we ask it. Amen.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the fourth chapter of St. John's First Epistle. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

We have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as He is so also are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. We love because He first loved us. If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him: whoever loves God must also love his brother. ^(ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Joh. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who is constantly busy and active distributing the gifts of His love, dear fellow redeemed:

We know why the beggar Lazarus in the Holy Gospel for today was laid at the gate of the rich man. It is because the rich man obviously had the means to help him. But having the means to help and having the desire to help are two different things. The rich man did not care about Lazarus. He cared about his fine linens and his great feasts. This man lacked love. It is no surprise to learn that he also lacked faith. We know this because his soul went to hell when he died.

Faith and love go together. Those who have faith have love for others. Those who do not have faith do not have love for others—at least not the kind of love that God requires. The world is very confused about love. The world thinks of love as a feeling, an emotion, the thing that makes me happy. This love is not so much focused outward toward others but inward toward self. We are told to cultivate a self-love, to focus on what is self-fulfilling. And if someone does not show us the love that we require, then it is time to find another who will.

What if God defined love in this way? What if He said that He will love us only if we properly show love to Him? This is what we would think if all we had was the Law of God. The Commandments tell us to perfectly love the true God only, to perfectly honor His name, to

perfectly hear and learn His Word. But we have not loved God like this. So what is stopping Him from walking away and never coming back?

He does not walk away from us, because His love for us does not depend on our love for Him. He loved us even in our fallen and rebellious state. In perhaps the most well-known passage in the Bible, the apostle John records these words of Jesus about God's love: *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life"* (Joh. 3:16).

God loved the world not because we had earned His love, as though He owed something to us. He loved the world because He is love. And He expressed that love not by making us as comfortable as He can on earth before our sad and hopeless death. He sent His only Son to redeem us, so that we have hope in this life and are saved from eternal suffering in hell.

This is the love that John refers to in today's text when he says: *"God is love."* Some take this to mean that whoever and however and whatever I choose to love, God supports me. Like a 70s hippie, God just wants us to love, man, and there are no rules or restrictions about that love. But characterizing God's love in this way is false and blasphemous. God does not approve of our sinful behavior. He does not support the destructive things we do that go against His holy Law.

If the love I have for someone or something does not agree with the Ten Commandments, then it is not the love of God. So it is right for a man and a woman to love each other and want to serve one another. But it is not right for them to express that love in a sexual way until they are married. It is right for two men or two women to have love for each other and work on building their relationship. But it is not right for them to pursue a union of flesh. It is right to admire the nice things one's neighbor has. But it is not right to covet those things and seek to take them.

It is so important that we recognize this. Some Christians have the idea that as long as they say they believe, then it does not matter how they live their life. They don't like to be told that "Christians shouldn't," or "Christians won't." "No one has the right to tell me if I'm a Christian or not," they say. "I know what I am in my heart." But what if the rich man had called himself a good Christian? Wouldn't it be natural to expect him to help the beggar Lazarus as God's Commandments require? Wouldn't his inactivity make his personal testimony questionable?

If our life is lacking in the love that God requires, and it is filled with a selfish love which God condemns, that calls our faith into question. Then what we say is totally different than how we act. Let's say you called yourself a Bears fan, but you wore Packers gear, and you rooted for the Packers even when they played the Bears. Could that cause someone to wonder if you really were a Bears fan?

When that kind of inconsistency shows up in the life of a Christian, between what he says and what he does, this indicates a problem. In that case it would be good and loving for another Christian to warn him about the inconsistency, so that his faith is not lost. Jesus clearly tells us that it is possible to lose faith (Luk. 8:4-15). Faith is more than mere knowledge. It is not just a recitation of the facts given in the Bible. Faith grabs hold of the promises of the Gospel. It clings to the perfect life and atoning death of Jesus for our righteousness and forgiveness.

Faith receives what God gives by grace. Faith does not express itself defiantly, as though a believer could never be guilty of a sin. Faith expresses itself in humble repentance for sins committed day after day, and it looks to Jesus for salvation. Only Jesus lived the life of love that God requires. He lived a life of perfect love toward God and neighbor. His life of love is why we are acceptable before the Father. His love is credited to us by faith in Him.

Where faith is alive by the grace of God, it is also active. Faith bears fruit in our lives. It is active in a Godly love. *"We love because He first loved us,"* writes John. This love for others is not self-serving; it is self-sacrificing. It is not pleasure-seeking; it is service-oriented. It is not boastful or arrogant. It is not calloused or insensitive. It is patient and kind and generous and forgiving. That is the love God has for us, and it is the love He calls us to have for each other.

But we have not loved in this way, not always. We can all look back (and we don't have to look very far) to see where we have failed to love like we should. So how confident can we be on the day of judgment? Will we stand before God and say that we loved as He loved us? John writes that *"There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love."* Are you afraid to give an account before God of how you have loved? Are you afraid of His punishment?

The blessed truth is that we will not be judged on the last day by what we have done or failed to do. We will be judged by what Jesus did. His perfect life of love is credited to us by faith. In this way, we are just like a beggar. When a humble beggar receives a gift, he does not think about how well he has begged or how worthy he is to get something. He is simply grateful to receive. He recognizes that he has been given something that he did not have before and had no ability to get.

This is what God has done for us. He has brought to us the perfect work of Jesus—His holy life, His atoning death, His great resurrection. He doesn't wait for us to prove our worth before He will give it. He reaches down to us through His Word and Sacraments, peels open our sin-clenched hands, and gives us blessing after blessing. He did this for the beggar Lazarus, and He does it for us. He gives us such abundant riches that there is more than enough to share with others.

Suppose someone handed a beggar a million dollars. Wouldn't it seem harsh if he turned up his nose at his fellow beggar friends and kept his newfound wealth all to himself? In the same way, since we have received such great riches from God, why would we keep them to ourselves? How could we gratefully receive His love, but not want to show love to those around us? A faith that is alive and well by the working of the Holy Spirit through the Word cannot help but extend love to others.

This is what you are prepared for in church each week. You come here to be filled up with the love of God. You come to have your bag of faith resupplied. You are filled with God's forgiveness, His courage, His peace, and His strength. You leave here spiritually rejuvenated, blessed. Having received these gifts, your faith is ready for action. Now you see one neighbor lonely, another sad, another in pain, another racked by guilt. You know what they need. They need the love of God in Christ. So you show your love by listening to them, by caring for them, and especially by pointing them to Jesus and the undying love He has for all.

A Living Faith Is Active in Love. Your faith is alive because it is fixed on Jesus, and Jesus is most certainly alive. And because your faith is alive, it is active in love. The love you show does not have to come from some source or supply of love inside you. That kind of love often runs out. But the perfect love of your Lord for you and for others is never exhausted. As you continue to draw on His love by faith, you will never be without love for your neighbors.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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