

The Sixth Sunday of Easter, Year B, 2009  
The Rev. Ronald N. Johnson

An Episcopal priest friend of mine told me that he was once approached, after church, by a member of his parish that was, shall we say, a challenge to the priest's blood pressure if not his Christian deportment. The good father was surprised to be complicated on his sermon - a first from this parishioner. The man said, "Father, I'm glad you talked about what you did, today, because I was really getting tired of this love thing Sunday after Sunday."

Well, I think it has to be really difficult to be a Christian if you get tired of hearing about this "love thing," because this "love thing" is the very essence of Christianity. If you take love out, there is nothing left. All other Christian doctrine falls apart and disintegrates into nothing if God's great love expressed in Jesus Christ is taken away. And so, we come, today, to one of the greatest statements on love found anywhere in the Bible. Jesus said, "As the Father has loved me, so I have 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. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."

To me, this gospel passage is most compelling and powerful. This passage is part of what we call the "Farewell Discourse" in John's Gospel. It gets into the heart of the Savior and reveals his intense, profound emotions for his friends, just as he was about to die. The urgency and immediacy of our Lord's words reveal the depth of his love and the agony of saying goodbye. The intensity of this love is profound and transforming, especially for early Christians faced with persecution. You can say that it was the love experienced in Christianity that brought on their conversions. The same is true today. God's love, expressed through present-day disciples of Jesus Christ, compels. The love draws. There is simply nothing more that one could ever want than the unconditional love of God which accepts us as we are, forgives our sins and adopts us into the very family of Almighty God. The Christianity community tries to express this love, because it is one thing that we have from our Lord that truly sets us apart.

It is mind boggling, but nonetheless true, that this understanding of God as perfect love is a uniquely Christian thing. Aside from Christianity, no religion understands God as lover. Many religions understand their god as judge, but not as lover. They might understand their god as the creator, as an authority figure, even as a manipulator, but God as a lover, looking for personal relationships with humans? You find this only in Christianity. This sets us apart. This love of God in Christ gives us hope. It is this love of God in Christ for us that lets us surrender our anxieties to Jesus, and, in trust, have faith. It is this love of God in Christ for us that lets us rise above ourselves to reach out in love to others and, in spite of personal cost, strive to do that which is righteous and loving for others. If we did not know God's love, we would be much more self-serving, but

because we do know our Savior's love, it is not all that hard to follow his commandment to love one another, even though true love always bears the cost of personal sacrifice.

Our Lord's love required his life. Christian love, lived in the imitation of Christ, requires that we die a little to ourselves each time we live out love. In the Gospel this morning, we read these words of Jesus, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." C. S. Lewis, the great English author and Christian, said "Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. The alternative to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy, is damnation. The only place where you can be perfectly safe from all the perturbations of love is Hell."

It is obvious that my priest friend's parishioner, who was tired of "the love thing," did not carry the love of Christ in his heart. I don't know why, but I do know this. When you know Jesus, when you love Jesus, then and only then are you truly equipped to live out the love of Christ in this world, but only in knowing the love of Christ would you want to. *Amen.*