

**Easter V (RCL Year B)  
May 10, 2009 (Mothers Day)**

**St. Margaret's  
Annapolis**

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. *Amen.*

At our diocesan convention a little more than a week ago, among the business of the diocese, the agenda included addresses by each of our bishops. It was a wonderful opportunity for me to get a sense of the theology and goals of Bishop Sutton. I was most favorably impressed and glad to be under the direction of such a bishop. As for Bishop Rabb, well I already knew and loved him from his days in Atlanta, and in fact, he was instrumental in getting me here to Maryland.

In his address, Bishop Rabb described his commitment to Christian Formation – Christian Education, if you will – and laid down this challenge: that every Christian of every age should be in some form of Christian Formation for at least an hour a week. That's a great goal, and this parish offers many opportunities for each and every one of us to do just that. But we're a denomination that really loves worship and liturgy, so for many of us, this is our hour each week.

But today, you're a captive audience, so I'm going to throw in a little bible study for your Christian Formation this week. It's about these readings we do from "the epistles."

You know, of course, that our readings are determined by a lectionary; that is, a prescribed schedule of readings for a three year cycle. The readings for a given Sunday usually include one from the Old Testament, a Psalm, a second lesson from the epistles, and finally, a reading from one of the gospels.

The word "epistle" simply means letter. So all of those so-called books between the gospels and Revelation at the end, are all letters of one sort or another. And for some reason beyond knowing, they are in order of their length. (You'll have to forgive me if I'm telling you things you already know, but it never hurts, does it, to have a little review.)

Now, any of our second year EFM students, or those in one of our bible study groups, can tell you that First, Second, and Third John, known as the Johannine letters (not to be confused with the gospel of John) are near the

end of the New Testament. That's a dead giveaway that they are very short!

The Second Letter of John is only thirteen verses -- not chapters -- verses; and the third letter is just fifteen verses. They are odd, somewhat personal little letters; more like notes, really. And one might wonder why the early church included them in the canon of scripture.

But think of what we would have missed if we didn't have at least this First Letter of John that we heard from just a bit ago: "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God, for God is love." And this: "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them." Then... "We love because he first loved us. Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brother and sisters also."

(Now, just to give you a heads-up, I'm going to go from teaching to preaching!)

If we say we love God, we must -- must -- show that by loving each other. What could be more clear than that? The way in which our true and sustained relationship with God occurs is through our love for one another.<sup>i</sup>

In her book, To Love as God Loves, Roberta Bondi writes about the spirituality of the early desert mothers and fathers, those mystics who from the earliest time in Christian history withdrew from ordinary society to dedicate themselves to prayer and union with the Holy One. One of those that Professor Bondi writes about was a man named Dorothea of Gaza. Dorothea described God as the center, the hub, of a wheel. We are the spokes of the wheel, and we cannot get closer to God without getting closer to each other; nor can we get closer to each other without getting closer to God.

Dorothea must have heard the words of John's first letter.

It's such a great description, that image of the wheel, the hub, and the spokes, that there is hardly anything else to be said.

I considered telling a story I read about a childless couple who adopted their orphaned nephew; how they sacrificed for him, labored so that he could go to college and make something of himself. How, when he tried to thank them, to acknowledge them as his mother and father, and to express his

desire to repay them for all they had done for him... they explained that the love of parents cannot be repaid. It can only be passed on. (Notice how I managed to slip that in!)

It's a good story, and it would have tied nicely into Mothers Day. But when considering First John and lines such as, "The commandment we have from [Christ] is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also," well, that story would run the risk of sentimentality.

But there is nothing sentimental about this reading from First John. It isn't about being nice to each other, or about being grateful. It's not about lending a helping hand to our neighbors, or writing a check (however generous and freely given) to the church or our favorite charity.

All those things are good and to be wholeheartedly encouraged, but compared to this "commandment" from First John, those things are relatively easy. I think this is given as a commandment, in fact, for a reason: because it's a calling, a requirement, an imperative... to love the ones that are hard to love, and to understand ourselves literally as brothers and sisters of all God's children -- whether we like them or not.

The hard-to-love can include any number of categories. Think of all the types that Jesus reached out to -- lepers, beggars, prostitutes, cripples, people of other religions --or no religion at all -- the lame, the deaf, the blind. And in a culture in which women and children were not even counted in a crowd, he reached out to them, too. Can you think of any category of people... any kind of person... on whom he turned his back? Not even the hypocrites he so roundly criticized were beyond his reach.

Now, I don't think this is a matter of going out into the highways and byways looking for needy people to love. Maybe. But I think... *I think*, that as we practice loving, people who need our love will come into our lives. I think it just works that way. The people who need God's love will come to us looking for it.

Then it is precisely out of the practice of this kind of loving that we have a chance to realize that we -- all of us on this planet, "our island home" -- are related. ARE in fact brothers and sisters. And this is true whether or not we know it, acknowledge it, like it, or act on it.

It is not about religion or theology. It's not about nations or skin color. It's not about politics or socio-economics. And it is not about being right in our

particular interpretation of scripture and who God condemns or doesn't condemn.

It *is* about seeing the world and seeing each other, as God in Christ sees us. It is about looking through God's eyes, and instead of seeing a foreigner, a stranger, a threat -- being able to see as God sees, love as God loves.

Is this naïve? Yes. Is this radical? Most certainly. Is there any other way? No, I don't think so. Some would say that Jesus was naïve. Certainly he was radical. Thanks be to God, this same Jesus gives us the power of the Holy Spirit so that we might do the work he has given us to do; that is, to love as God loves!

"Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; [but] if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us."

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Preaching Through the Christian Year B, p. 259