

Easter 6, Year B

May 10, 2015

John 15:9-17 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. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

(Much of what I will share with you here comes from some reflections on our Gospel passage by Fr. John Shea.*)

This past week at our Annual Diocesan Clergy Conference, professor and priest Lauren Winner gave a workshop on her new book, *Wearing God: Clothing, Laughter, Fire, and Other Overlooked Ways of Meeting God*. Dr. Winner argues persuasively that the Bible is filled with images and metaphors of God which we often miss, images which could greatly deepen our understanding of – and relationship with – God. In her workshop, she focused on just one of these images: the metaphor of fragrance. The phrase, “pleasing odor,” Dr. Winner notes, is Biblical shorthand for an intimate encounter with God. “Walk in love,” Paul writes to the Ephesians, “as Christ loved us, and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

Now, scientists say that our sense of smell is more tied to our emotions than any of the other five senses. Aroma and fragrance is mentioned throughout the Bible in relation to God, yet rarely do we pay any attention – and rarely do we involve our sense of smell in worship. Our communion wafers don't even smell like bread – in fact, don't smell much like anything. And incense – used in the worship of God throughout the Bible and by many religions for thousands of years – makes some people cough, so we use it only rarely. Dr. Winner cited a passage from Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians which I confess, in my 35 years as a priest, I never paid any attention to. This is what Paul says (in *The Message* translation): “...Through us, [God] brings knowledge of Christ. Everywhere we go, people breathe in the exquisite fragrance. Because of Christ, we give off a sweet scent rising to God, which is recognized by those on the way of salvation—an aroma redolent with life. But those on the way to destruction treat us more like the stench from a rotting corpse.” (2 Corinthians 2:14-16) Dr. Winner challenges us to read the Bible with a much greater sensitivity to the countless images and metaphors which are found throughout.

In a similar vein, Lauren Winner spoke of the new field of “neurotheology,” which links our experiences of God with what is going on in our brains. You may have read articles or listened to news reports over the past few years about “How our Brains are Wired for God.” (e.g. <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/god/how-your-brain-wired-god>) At Clergy Conference, I had a conversation with Fr. George Lufkin from St. George’s in Leadville, whom some of you met last summer. Fr. George is fascinated by how quantum physics is linked with spiritual reality. He speaks of a fundamental, quantum resonance of the Spirit of God with our human spirits.

The academic field of Philosophy has picked up on this resonance, also, as Fr. John Shea points out. Some philosophers are convinced that the human person is naturally religious – not in the sense of belonging to a religion or being thoroughly convinced of a personal God, but in the sense that when one examines human life, one discovers an intuitive sense that there is a higher order of things, and that human well-being depends on people aligning themselves with, resonating with, that higher order. To be separated from this higher order is to be lost; to positively participate in this order is to be found.

In our Christian faith this higher order is a proactive love that is embodied and revealed in Jesus. People do not have to search for it as if **it** were not searching for *them* – for it *does* search for us. And its rules are simple: People must learn to live their lives in the same way that this proactive love, this higher order, lives.

“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you: abide in my love,” Jesus says in today’s Gospel. Abide in, be aligned with Christ-love, resonate with the higher order of reality.

There is a story about a king riding in a coach on a rainy day. He sees a poor man walking on the road and desires to give him a ride and keep him out of the rain. But the man is leery. “What must I do to get this ride?” the man asks. “Only accept it,” says the King. The key to relating to the higher order is to learn to receive its love.

But the King’s response is only half accurate. Yes, the man need only accept the ride in order to receive it. But the receiving doesn’t end the matter. Once that proactive, divine love is accepted, a chain effect takes place. As Jesus received the love of the *Father*, he loved his **disciples** with that *same* love, and a chain reaction started. “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you.” Then *we* in turn are to **add** to that chain: “Abide in my love; align yourself with my higher order proactive love. Be to others that Christ-aroma, redolent with life. This is my commandment: Love as you have been loved.” Living the life of the higher order includes giving that love away. This is how the chain is completed.

As we understand ourselves as links in the love chain – from the Father to Jesus, from Jesus to us, and from us to others – we move from an anxious, separate way of living into holy communion. There is no need to grab, or hold, or possess this life, as if it were a scarce commodity. It is abundant beyond measure. If we know this, having comprehended and lived out this law of the love chain, we have grasped what Jesus is ultimately about. And if we know what *Jesus* is ultimately about, we know what the *Father* is ultimately about; and the separation between the higher order and the lower order is collapsed. “I do not call you servants any longer,” Jesus says in our Gospel. There **are** no more servants or slaves who are ignorant of the ways of the higher order. There are only friends moving effortlessly in the Father’s love, abiding in that love.

Living a holy life, a life in sync with this higher order, a life resonating with the frequency of divine love, requires only that we abide in this love chain. And we are formed to be part of this love chain, created to emit a Christ-aroma.

The **problem** is that most of the time we don’t see this or believe it.

John Shea describes the problem by saying that we are constantly telling ourselves stories that are *not* eternally true. “We are both the *storyteller* and the *storylistener*,” Fr. Shea says. “In the inner depths of ourselves we are carrying on a conversation, telling ourselves a story to which we avidly listen. As we wake, wash, work, love, and play, we are telling ourselves the story of who we are. ‘I am someone who works at a job that does not maximize my talents...’ ‘I am someone who probably married too soon and am stuck with someone who doesn’t excite me...’ ‘I am someone who is getting older and I’m not getting out of life all I wanted...’ In the inner depths the story lamp is always lit, and neither *storyteller* nor *storylistener* fall asleep.

“The inner storytelling and storylistening process can take a negative turn,” Fr. Shea explains. “We remember and replay within ourselves events that have made an impact... [and] memorable events often are times when we have been shocked and humiliated, when our shortcomings and mistakes have broken into our consciousness with such force they cannot be expelled. Therefore, the story we learn to tell ourselves is a skewed version of who we truly are. We may even *know* that these are **lopsided** stories, but they are persuasive tales. The strange thing about negative stories is that they always promote themselves as the real picture. They appear as the raw, unvarnished truth before any ‘spin’.”

The question is: “Can we tell ourselves the story that **Jesus** tells his disciples and that he wants *them* to tell to others? Can we tell our story as a link in the love chain? If we do, will it be persuasive enough to modify our negative interior stories that are so prevalent that they seem to tell themselves? In the language of our Gospel, can we actually experience ourselves as chosen for love?”

Which story is the higher reality? Which story will **your** inner storyteller tell?
Which story will your inner story**listener** listen to – over, and over again?

Can we tell our story as a link in the love chain? Can we breathe in – and emit –
the fragrance of Christ?

AMEN

*Taken largely from John Shea, *Eating with the Bridegroom*, Collegeville, MN,
Liturgical Press, 2005, pp. 132-236