

**Sermon for Proper 17  
Year B**

**(RCL) Song of Solomon 2:8-13; Psalm 45:1-2, 7-10; James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23**

Love received is love to be shared.

Life is short – and we do not have too much time to gladden the hearts of those who travel the way with us. So let us be swift to love and make haste to be kind, and the blessing of God will be with us. In the early chapters of Genesis, God says to Abraham: “I will bless you, that you may be a blessing to others.”

How intimately these two are tied together, always: the act of our being blessed and the act of our blessing others.

The first way it is known, in our human experience, is in the embrace shared by parent and child. Can anything fill one’s hearts more completely than an earnest exchange of hugs with those just learning to offer them? Little children are so intent in their first expressions of physical affection, to be the recipient of such a hug just opens your heart. Unconditionally.

Who is blessing whom in that exchange? Love received is love that is shared. It’s as simple and profound as that.

As we grow and discover love in all its intimacy, what a miraculous experience it can be! The heartbeat quickens, the imagination anticipates even a passing encounter with the beloved, the sound of their voice, a smile crossing their face as they recognize your presence, a casual touch. Oh my!

Our first reading today is a compelling expression of the giving and receiving of such love. The Song of Solomon can be given many allegorical interpretations, but at its heart, its imagery is as simple as the blush of first love, ignited by the holding of one lover’s hand by the other for the first time.

We can sense in this passage a growing excitement in this poet’s response to even the thought of the approach of her beloved:

“The voice of my beloved! Look: he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills! ... like a gazelle or a young stag ... Arise my love, my fair one, and come away ... the time of singing has come.”

Goodness!

The surging of emotions is echoed in the Psalm: “My heart is stirring with a noble song.”

The should’s and the ought’s, the coulda’s and woulda’s of such relationships can, in time, get very complicated. But the human soul revels in the simple, mysterious act of offering one’s heart to another for the first time, for no reason other than the joy that its giving and receiving bring.

Love received is love to be shared. It is that simple and that profound.

The writer of the epistle of James also builds on this theme. Religious practices can get as complicated as interpersonal relations. Over time, we become more concerned about how we are “performing” those practices, and find ourselves further and further from the original fervor of religious passion that once impelled our religious choices.

James has to remind those who are growing long in the tooth in their religious practice that we need to be “doers of the word and not merely hearers.” They need to be reminded that “every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift is from above.” It is a gift we are given, the very motivation, the compulsion of the Spirit to join God in the act of self-giving love. It is not an accomplishment in ministry but a natural response of one beloved to another.

Again, in the embrace of lovers: who is giving and who is receiving in this exchange? Clearly, both, or something other than self-giving love is being exchanged.

It is so simple, when the heart of the beloved is truly led by love, until complications set in. And those complications are born of fear.

In his first epistle, John writes, “There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear.” And soon thereafter, he writes, “We love because God first loved us.”

Acts of kindness, patience, forgiveness – so many Christian virtues are second nature when one is in right relationship, and the sole motivation shared is love of the other. We are simply seeking to imitate God’s love for us as manifested in Christ Jesus.

It is only when one has replaced trust in such love with fear of rejection, that acts of charity become a chore. We all understand this, for as surely as we have all experienced the excitement of the first blush of love, we have experienced the onset of the more complicated swirl of thoughts and emotions that later infringe on that love.

In Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, there is a story of a stingy old woman who sought, from the misery of hell, the lake of fire where she found herself after she had died, to be raised to the comforts and joys of heaven. “I wasn’t all THAT bad!” she asserts to an angel passing by. “What about the time when the poor beggar came to my door and I gave him an onion?”

The angel swoops down and hovers just above the old woman, as together they look back upon that scene from her life. The woman had resentfully come to the back door of her grand mansion to try to shoo the beggar away, complaining loudly about the filthiness of his hands and face. “You don’t even wash before you come to beg?” Nonetheless, the woman had reached down into the bottom of her larder and produced a rotting onion that she handed over to the beggar.

“Well,” said the angel, “that should be enough to open the doors of heaven for you.” The angel lowers to her a rope with that very onion tied to its end. The woman grabs on, but as the rope is lifted, others in the lake of fire climb on, hoping to be pulled out as well. The old woman, alarmed by this, cries out, “Let go! Let go! It’s not you who are being pulled out! It’s me! It’s not your onion! It’s mine.” And just when she says, “It’s mine,” the onion snaps in two, falls out of the rope, and she falls back into the lake of fire. The angel weeps, as she flies away.

If only the old woman had had it in her heart to say, “The onion is ours,” surely the onion would have been strong enough to have pulled all of them out together.

There is insight in this story, echoing the same wisdom as the teaching of Jesus in our gospel for today.

Here, Jesus is set upon by the Pharisees, who for all their earnestness and concern for the purity code,

have traversed far from what James would call religion that is “pure and undefiled before God.” There are so many distractions for these too-well-practiced religious practitioners, the Pharisees. They care earnestly about their religion, but it is clear that only those who are equally obsessed with religious practices could relate to what they care about.

What Jesus is calling us to remains far simpler, and is, in the end, something that everyone, whether a professional religious practitioner or not, would understand and care about.

It is what comes from inside, from the center of our hearts, that will transform and quicken the heartbeat of our lives and the lives of those we encounter.

When one’s life is truly converted by God’s Spirit, the actions God yearns for us to know in our relationship with God and one another will be second nature to us. St. Augustine of Hippo once said, “Love God and do as you please.” If we are truly filled with love of God, what will please us will surely be what also pleases God!

Rumi, a Muslim mystic, spoke of the same phenomenon when he wrote: “Look inside and find where a person loves from. That’s the reality, not what they say.”

What does God require of us? What spiritual practices will open the gates of heaven to us?

It is, in the end, the return of the spirit to the place where love of God is born, not where it is mastered, that right relationship with God and one another will be found.

Remember that life is short. We do not have too much time to gladden the hearts of those who travel the way with us. Simply, very simply: let us be swift to love, and make haste to be kind. And the blessing of God will be received and given, in one fell swoop, in our relations with others and with God each day.

Yes. It is that simple.

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