

## “All You Need Is Love”

- I. Introduction: “All you need is love.” In a time long ago, June 25, 1967, a song written by John Lennon was initially performed by the Beatles on Our Love, the first live global television link. It was broadcast to 26 different countries and watched by approximately 400 million people. Some of us who can remember back to 1967 will no doubt know that the song was entitled “All You Need Is Love.” Brian Epstein, the manager of the Beatles, is quoted to have said, “It was an inspired song and the Beatles really wanted to give the world a message” (*The Beatles Anthology, Chronicle Books, p. 257*). The song is very powerful. It still rings in my ears. The song’s verse begins with the word “love” sung seven times and includes the lines “There’s nothing you can do that can’t be done; nothing you can sing that can’t be sung . . . Nothing you can make that can’t be made [and] There’s no one you can save that can’t be saved . . . all you need is love.”

The Beatles swept the world with their music, and there were many of us in the 1960s, in spite of all our faults, who took the message of love seriously and tried hard to put it into action. At the risk of oversimplifying, this message of love seemed to suggest that if we tried hard enough and loved hard enough we could make this world into a very different place. As many of us look back over the last 41 years, I think we’ve learned that it is much harder to change this world than many of us originally thought.

- II. But let’s not give up on love too quickly. In today’s Gospel reading from Matthew, Jesus had some earthshaking things to say about the power of love. And he said them in the face of a hostile audience that was trying to find a way to stone him to death. Jesus had already entered Jerusalem triumphantly on what we call Palm Sunday. The religious authorities were very threatened by Jesus and were trying to trick him into answering questions that could allow them to accuse him of blasphemy. So they asked him to choose which commandment in the law was the greatest. That was a trick question. Picking one commandment would allow the Pharisees to accuse him of not supporting the whole law. You see, the law included 613 commandments: 365 negative commandments, one for each day of the year, and 248 positive commandments, one for each body part. These elements of the law were enforced rigidly, yet the underlying spirit of the law was lost in the complexity of the detailed rules.

Here is where Jesus once again cut to the quick. He responded: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.” Jesus was quoting the famous Jewish Prayer called the Shema from Deuteronomy 6.5. Then Jesus went on to also say, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” This passage was drawn from Leviticus 19.18. As far as Jesus was concerned, love is all that we really need. Deceptively and intriguingly simple, isn’t it?

- III. Was Jesus’ message the same as the message of the Beatles in 1967? In one way, yes. On a superficial level, both pointed to the centrality of how we must love another. On a deeper level, I believe that these two messages are built on fundamentally different premises. At the risk of over generalizing, I believe that our culture’s definition of love, as captured in the Beatles’ song, often centers around ourselves. In this way of loving, there a strong theme of self-fulfillment and individuality. The 1960s was the beginning of a time within society known as the post-modern age, in which each one of us essentially decides what is true for us. We do tend to have a great deal of freedom in the post-modern world, but we also place a strong value upon ourselves as individuals – our own stories, our own values, and our own priorities. In the post-modern world, for example, objective truth is often not to be trusted because we must all find our own truths.

In contrast to the definition of love in the postmodern culture, the kind of love Jesus was proposing has a very different center of gravity. Jesus proposed that God is at the center of our experience of love; that is, the self in the center is replaced by God. Yet in our post-modern world, our culture increasingly has defined self as at the center. This is a critical distinction and a key difference that we need to grasp as followers of Jesus Christ. If God is at the center of our lives, then in fact life itself is a process of learning to be loved by God and in turn to love God back. For us as Christians, God is the source of love, the re-enforcer of love, and the multiplier of love. Left to our own devices, we have tremendous difficulty in being consistently loving to others, rather than being self-serving. In fact, one very basic, time-honored definition of evil or sin is the attempt to place some aspect of ourselves, rather than God, at the center of our lives. When we recognize that we need God and that God loves us, we are capable of wonderful acts of love to others. The two are inextricably bound together – our love for God and our love for one another.

- IV. Love and action. I want to end today by stressing an organic relationship I see in today’s Gospel reading between love and action. One of the distinguishing characteristics of being a Christian is the relationship between how we feel love toward others and how we act in loving ways. Some historians believe that one of the reasons why early Christianity grew so quickly was because of the powerful love that was displayed between early Christians in spite of their class differences. Slaves and masters, for example, were all equal members of the Body of Christ. There was intense suffering at

the time of the early church, just as there is intense suffering now. Christians have long been known for their love and for the ways in which they express their love in active caring for one another. Just during this past week I have been aware of multiple financial, health, and other kinds of struggles that people in this parish are having, and that the people around us are experiencing as well. This is a difficult time for many.

This week I wrote my pastoral letter for our monthly parish newsletter. In it I asked you to be prayerful, constant, and generous. Sometimes, I wonder what kind of letter the Apostle Paul might write to the Church of the Ascension as he did to the church in Thessalonika in today's lectionary. I can imagine that he might write something like this:

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

Continue the work that God has begun in you; continue to be generous in the giving of your time and your resources to those in need – do not pull back because of the fear you might be experiencing about your financial security. To those in need, let the leaders of your community know, so that the church may fulfill its responsibility to care for you; to those in plenty, be even more generous, so that the work of God's Spirit can go on in this place. Do not hold back, do not limit the miracles that God can do among you. Focus not unduly upon the ways that liturgies, programs, and operations may fall short, although it is good to aspire for improvement; but rather be fully open to the gifts that God has given to you, to the others I have sent to minister with you, and to the many opportunities for ministry that I have given you. Live into this Kairos moment, and let the Holy Spirit soar, Church of the Ascension. God bless and keep you and make his face to shine upon you. *Amen.*