

Sixth Sunday after Easter ~ Year C
May 13, 2007
The Reverend Dr. Howard J. Hess

“Love You Forever”

Let us pray: Come, Holy Spirit, Come:

Come as the fire and kindle in our hearts a love of the Lord Jesus,
Come as the dove and bring to our lives the Peace of God,
Come as the wind and blow away the clouds of confusion that keep us from following
Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.
In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

- I. Most excellent congregations. Several years ago, the Lilly Foundation conducted a study to identify the nation’s 300 most excellent Catholic parishes and 400 most excellent Protestant congregations. Several churches in each state were selected for this honor. The churches were quite diverse; large and small; urban, suburban, and rural; and belonging to a denomination and independent. What particularly caught my attention was the general characteristic that set these excellent churches apart. Using a term of Flannery O’Conner’s, these churches were found to have a “habit of being” that reflected their “living the Gospel.” The study’s author emphasized that each church was doing so in its own unique way. These churches were not constrained by either old traditional ways of doing business or by feeling compelled to try new fads. They were willing to think outside the box. But what all these churches did have in common was that a newcomer could pick up this dynamic “habit of being” within 15 minutes of entering a worship service.

Experts pointed to three mutually re-enforcing qualities of this “habit of being.” First, there was a profound sense of joy in excellent churches and a powerful contagious joy that was readily shared. Secondly, there was a peacefulness that allowed worshippers to let go of their distractions and worries. This is the peacefulness Paul describes as passing all understanding. And thirdly, the excellent churches all conveyed the strong presence of Agape love. It is this Agape love I’d like to concentrate on this morning. As Jesus conveyed in today’s Gospel, Agape love originates in the unconditional love between God the Father and God the Son. In turn, that love is shared with us through the work of God’s Holy Spirit, and we in turn are empowered to share it with one another.

- II. The basic formula of Agape love is demonstrated in the shape of the cross. Nicky Gumbel refers to this in Alpha. The vertical dimension of the cross shows the love that flows between God the Father and Jesus Christ, the Son. And we're right smack in the middle of that energy flow. Jesus Christ has invited us there! That's why we as Christians can extend beyond ourselves and love one another in such deep ways -- ways that at their best involve sacrifice without getting credit. That's how the horizontal bar works . . . love originates from God the Father and God the Son and then we share that love with one another. But this only works when as believers we say yes to Jesus' commands and turn love into action.

- III. Now sometimes, because we're a little slow, God gives us very concrete, human examples of Agape love. One good example of Agape love is the very thing we are celebrating today on May 13th — Mother's Day. For many of us, our relationships with our mothers and fathers were the first place we experienced unconditional Agape love. This was true in the life of St. Augustine, one of the greatest theologians and bishops in the history of the Christian church. His mother Monica was a Christian who had raised her three children to follow Christ. In spite of her teaching, Augustine abandoned Christianity as a young man and turned to an immoral life.

For 16 years, Monica prayed earnestly for her son to become a Christian. She did not give up on him. When Augustine left home to go to Italy in 383 AD, reflecting her concern she went with him. She was present at the time of Augustine's conversion to Christianity. In his Confessions Augustine credits his mother with first revealing the face of Christ to him. She was loving, yet strong and uncompromising. Her mother's love was tenacious. Monica died during their journey home to North Africa. She is said to have told her son that she could die peacefully because she knew he was now in God's hands. In the end Augustine remembered what many of us remember about our mothers -- their love for God, their love for us, and the faithful way they lived or are living their lives.

- IV. Deep, profound love is powerful because it both sustains and transforms us! And it continues across generations. Think about the experiences of unconditional love in your life. In the years after I left home, I, like Augustine, was sure I knew a better way than that which my parents had taught me. Yet try as hard as I could to build distance between myself and God, I was unable to do so. God wouldn't let me go! After our first child Jeremy was born, I made my way back in earnest to the church. One Sunday a professor from the Christian college I had attended visited our church. I shared the details of my journey with him. He looked me square in the eyes and said "someone must have been praying very faithfully for you." In fact, just as Monica had prayed for her son, my mother had prayed for me daily.

Her prayers were answered. There could be no better gift than a mother's and a grandmother's prayer. And in turn, each day Peg and I pray for each of our two children and their children. And so the cycle continues.

This is beautifully captured in children's story by Robert Munsch entitled *Love You Forever* (1986). *Love You Forever* begins with a mother holding her new baby. She rocks him and sings a little song:

*I'll love you forever, I'll like you for always.
As long as I'm living, My baby you'll be.*

As the years go by, of course, the baby grows. He becomes a toddler and gets into everything: and his mother says: This kid is driving me CRAZY!

But at night she still sings him their special song:

*I'll love you forever, I'll like you for always.
As long as I'm living, My baby you'll be.*

The baby grows some more; he is nine years old, never wants to take a bath, and says bad words when his grandma visits. His mother feels like selling him to the Zoo. But still, at night she sings their song.

The boy becomes a teenager, and of course, that's the worst! He has strange friends, he wears strange clothes, and he listens to strange music. His mother feels like she lives in a Zoo! But guess what? At night, when he is safely asleep, she still sings to him. Finally the boy is all grown up and moves into his own house. But sometimes, on dark nights he and his mother sit together, and she sings, well, you know what she sings:

*I'll love you forever, I'll like you for always,
As long as I'm living, My baby you'll be.*

At last, the mother is old and sick. She sings to her boy, but she isn't able to finish the song. Her son, however, has learned his lesson well. He knows what to do. Holding his mother close, he rocks her in his arms, and sings to her:

*I'll love you forever, I'll like you for always,
As long as I'm living, My mommy you'll be.*

And when he returns home that night, he stands for a long time at the top of the stairs. Then, going into the room where his own new baby daughter is sleeping, he takes her in his arms and sings:

*I'll love you forever, I'll like you for always,
As long as I'm living, My baby you'll be.*

We can see the cycle of unconditional love between parent and child beginning all over again.

- V. This story exemplifies an important truth about Agape love. It is powerful and it is enduring. In being loved, we learn to become the instruments of God's love towards one another. We become the hands and feet of Christ as we love each other. We see Christ's love in the faces of those around us.

A visiting Bishop from outside North America was interested to see the way that Americans pass the Peace: "The peace of the Lord be always with you." He found this meaningful, but shared what happens in his country. There the custom is to take the hand of the person next to you, look in that person's eyes, and say "I love the face of Christ I see." I LOVE THE FACE OF CHRIST I SEE.

On this Mother's Day, we call to mind the faces of our mothers and our fathers, and of others whose love has been a reflection of Christ's love for us. Let us thank God for them and pray that God will also use us as icons, as windows, of God's love for others. And as we share the peace today, let us look into the faces of our brothers and sisters and love the face of we Christ we find there. And let us search for the face of Christ beyond the boundaries of our own families and friends. Let our Agape love in this church be so powerful that it fills up the space around us. Let there be no question that the Church of the Ascension has a "habit of being" filled with joy, peace and Agape love. Amen.