

Lucia Lloyd's sermon
June 5, 2011 12, 2010
John 17: 1-11

Easter 7, Year A

The bumper sticker says, "God loves you. And I'm trying." That's now my #1 favorite bumper sticker. You know if I had to summarize the teachings of Jesus in ten words or less, it would be, "God loves you. Love God. Love your neighbor." So a pretty good summary of Christian life would be, "God loves you. And I'm trying."

There are some people in the world who are so easy to love it seems our love for them flows with no effort at all. For example, Mason Brent: we love you! We are deeply appreciative of your hospitality in hosting the Bluegrass & BBQ, and your support and kindness to our congregation. And it is easy to love the many people who are generous with their time, talent and treasure, who make our events so wonderful, and our mission and ministry so fruitful. In our individual lives too, we can think of plenty of people among our relatives, our friends, and our neighbors who are so easy to love that the love seems effortless. And then there are the rest, the people for whom we can say, "God loves you. And I'm trying."

In some ways, trying to love is loving, just like trying to sing is singing, or trying to draw is drawing. We make mistakes, we fall short, we feel inadequate, but even with all our imperfections, we're still doing those things. Whatever effort you make to act lovingly toward your neighbors, is loving your neighbors.

Still, we read Jesus' prayer in today's gospel passage, "Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one" and we can think of the various ways in which that prayer has not yet been fulfilled, the ways the followers of Jesus are not yet one, as Jesus and the Father are one.

There is a reason that the lectionary appoints these scriptures for this particular day. Today is our last Sunday during Easter season. By next Sunday, the fifty days of Easter will be over and we will be celebrating Pentecost, which is our celebration of the coming of the Holy Spirit. So today is a turning point.

While Jesus is on earth, we get to see what God's love looks like. In Jesus, we get to see God's love for the poor, God's love for the outcast, God's love for the sick,

God's love for the stranger, God's love for those who think of themselves as more righteous than others, God's love for those who think of themselves as less righteous than others. In the crucifixion, we see the lengths to which God will go to show us that love, and in the resurrection we see that God's love is stronger than death itself.

Seeing what God's love looks like in action is a wonderful thing, and an essential part of our faith. Jesus' role as an excellent example, and Jesus' role as an excellent teacher are both very valuable as far as they go. But there is more to Jesus than an example or a teacher. When I watch Olympic gymnasts I can see they are excellent examples of their sport. They could explain to me a lot about gymnastics. But watching Olympic gymnasts would not make me able to do a back flip on the balance beam. I have to have the ability in me to do that back flip. The same thing is true for the disciples, that it's valuable for them to see Jesus' love, but what they really need is the ability to love that way themselves. So people need to see the Risen Christ showing God's love: that's the "God loves you" part. And they need the Holy Spirit to enable them to love that way too: that's the "I'm trying" part. God loves you, and I'm trying. So this is the day when our scriptures tell us about the ascension, when the Risen Christ goes back to heaven, now that they have seen "God loves you," and when Christ tells his followers that they will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes to them so that they can start "I'm trying."

It is the Holy Spirit in us that enables us to love God and to love our neighbors. In our mortal lives on earth, we do not do this loving God and loving our neighbors perfectly. What we can say is: God loves you, and I'm trying. The same is true of our neighbors.

My friend Susan has a daughter named Selam who is in preschool. She recently wrote this:

There is a boy in Selam's class. Let's call him Bob. He has a shock of hair, freckles and a smile that God painted to demonstrate delight. Seriously, this kid is full of delight. Sand moving from one hand to another? delight. Water and a red boat in the water table? delight. Selam liking his shoes? delight. It is an exquisite smile. It's one you just want to mirror.

The problem with Bob is, well, he has problems. He has a hard time sitting still and following directions. He gets excited and pushes kids. He destroys materials, just to see what might happen if, say, you were to snip the tips off the markers. He gets angry and hits.

All year, I've heard people talk about this child (this child that honestly I find so exquisite that I feel defensive on his behalf even though he's not my kid). The problem with Bob is that he's the only boy in the family. The problem with Bob is that he has no discipline. The problem with Bob is he must have ADD and needs medicine. The problem with Bob is that he has no respect. The problem with Bob is....

The thing is Selam loves Bob as much as I do. More, actually. Truth be told, she breaks into a big goofy smile every time she sees him, and will run full out across the room for the chance to share the listening table with him.

As pure as her love for him is, she's also the self-appointed class reporter. Everyone who gets in trouble with the teachers goes on Selam's daily report. Today, she was telling me what Bob did, and then I heard her say the phrase that I've come to hate from parents and teachers.....

"The problem with Bob is.....he has a good heart inside and he just can't let everybody see it yet. He needs help getting it outside."

The more I think about Selam's description of Bob, the more it seems to describe the human condition. The problem with those humans is, they have a good heart inside and they just can't let everybody see it yet; they need help getting it outside. Those Christians, they have the Holy Spirit inside and they need help getting it outside. It is true of my own life; I have the Holy Spirit in me, and I need help getting it outside. We have so many resources to help us get the Holy Spirit outside in our lives. Prayer can help us get the Holy Spirit outside. The dear people in our community of faith can help us get the Holy Spirit outside. Verses of the Bible can help us get the Holy Spirit outside. Sermons can help us get the Holy Spirit outside. Thanking God for the splendor of creation can help us get the Holy Spirit outside. Even sermons can help us get the Holy Spirit outside.

For the people with whom my relationships are not easy, it is helpful for me to remember to look for the Holy Spirit in them. It is valuable for me to remember God loves them, and I'm trying. And it's useful for me to remember that I'm one of the people others find difficult to love, but to recognize the ways in which they are trying to

love me. When we come across someone who is difficult to love, it really does make a difference if we pause for just a moment and think, “God loves you. And I’m trying.” It shifts our way of thinking to see the other person through the merciful eyes of God. It shifts our way of thinking away from a focus on what’s “wrong” with the other person and toward a focus on love. That in itself can have a huge effect.

It may be that their attempts to love me may seem not good enough or right enough (from my point of view) but it is enormously helpful to me to see that they are trying to love me, and that trying to love me is, in a way, loving me. Just as my trying to love them is, in a way, loving them. God loves them, and I’m trying. God loves me (with all my flaws) and they’re trying. God loves them (with all their flaws) and I’m trying. God loves you. Love God. Love your neighbor.