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Staying Connected to God - Keeping Commandments
5/9/2021 Easter 6B

Adventurous lectionary - "Those who love go beyond the isolated and frightened ego and its needs, and are willing to sacrifice for the greater good, are able to transform our world and create new communities of love. They learn the joy of going from self interest to world loyalty."

This is a great day for talking about love, isn't it? Mothers' Day, remembering and celebrating our moms and what they did for us, gave us, taught us. Not all moms are perfect, true, so maybe some folks don't have the best memories - many of us, however, had perfectly adequate moms who did the best they could, and we love them. Parental love is among the images God seems to have chosen to explain how God loves us - the Father/Son imagery that Jesus used, for example, to explain about the connection between them and the Spirit - and also to explain the relationship to all of us as kin of the same family. We are loved, we are made by God and in God's own image; God's breath animates us, God's creation surrounds us. God feeds us physically and spiritually through literal food which is seen as actually God's own body. Christian mystics have long compared God's feeding of our souls through communion as a mother feeding her child the milk of her own body. When human relationships are as they are intended to be, they can mirror the Divine.

You may have noticed that I've work to speak about God in ways that aren't totally masculine. There's nothing wrong with speaking of God in the masculine, except if that's the only way we speak of God, the only imagery we use for God. Then it becomes unquestioned and unexamined, and anything not masculine becomes unworthy imagery for God. For example, you all might have a big reaction if I spoke of God she - if I used the female pronoun for God. I mean, we use the masculine pronoun 'he' for God without a second thought, but to use the pronoun 'she' would sound add to our ears, make us sit up and take notice. Maybe upset us!

Why? Male and female were created in God's image. Neither male nor female is more like God than the other, or less worthy of standing as an imagery for God than the other. In fact, as we understand God as a trinity in relationship, it may well be that it's the relationship between people that which is in God's image. It's the love and connection between the parts of God that is mirrored in our own human relationships of love and connection. Parental love is one illustration. Other believers have spoken of Jesus as a brother, or even as a husband. Certainly the imagery of a spouse is all over the Hebrew Scriptures as a picture of God's relationship with Israel. We sing, "What a Friend We have in Jesus," lifting up the imagery of a good friend who knows us well and still likes to be with us.

I've attempted to broaden our mental images for God, to expand our inner conception of God through the use of words like Source and Creator - these don't have the same relational impact as Mother, Father, Brother, Spouse or Friend. All the same, they express a truth of who God is to us. A colleague uses the term "Birther", a word of relationship that somewhat avoids gender but is still relational.

Because it's the relational aspect of God that we are talking about when we talk of love - the love between us and God, the love between each other. Love is fundamental when we speak of God. God may be mysterious and beyond our scope of knowing absolutely; God may be our Source whose being is awe-inspiring beyond our understanding. Yet God loves; God seeks to be in relationship with us. God is not an "it," God is a "Thou." Personal as well as infinite, loving as well as powerful, wanting to reveal Godself to us as well as virtually incomprehensible in magnitude.

The love of God is pictured in Scripture as sacrificial - another similarity to parental love. Parenting a young human to grow into all they can become takes an ability to step back from having them fill our own needs, and learning to see their needs and meet them. A parent, mom or dad, has to be able to put their own wants aside in order to do what is good for the child. A good parent will do this willingly. Not that we become a zero and our needs don't matter - but that a growing child's needs call us to do this at least in their young years. We give up our sleep to do night feedings, or be with them when they're actively sick. We give up partying to all hours because kids have bedtimes. We learn to bite our tongues to not say cruel and hurtful things that will sit in them and hurt them for years to come. We are patient to help them learn to name their feelings and understand why they are upset. We teach them to drive, for Pete's sake, and try not to stamp the floor or clench our hands. We watch them separate from us and go off, and we cry after they're gone, because we want this good for them.

The very hardest thing I ever did for my own children was to let them talk about missing their dad, after we were divorced. I was hurt and angry myself, but I knew they needed to express their sad feelings about him not living with them any more, so I listened and heard their fears. Boy was that hard. Staying present to their need, and finding a counselor to talk to about my own pain - that's what a parent does. Not even talking about sexuality was harder! We do things like this because we love them for the person that they are and that they are becoming. Could God do any less? No.

All of this teaches us more about God's love for us, God's patience, God's presence, God's care for our suffering, God wanting good for us.

Then God asks us to expand our understanding of family and kin to include more other people, like those of us here in a congregation. God asks us to think of the good of all people, and how all people deserve to be treated: to not be victims of our anger, the violence of our words or actions, to not inflict the hurts in them that were inflicted on us by the world, or work or betrayals; to not inflict our need to be right or get our own way.

Then God asks us to expand our love even further - to the world which God already loves, too. Congregations, the way we do them here in our time & our country, tend to be rather homogenous - we mainly find congregations with people we understand, people like us. Of course there are always differences that come up - none of us are identical in makeup. But we may visit different places until we find a style that we're more comfortable with, and people we feel something in common with, and a theology not too different from our own. Interestingly, the Roman Catholic model was geographic - you were assigned to a parish according to where you lived, and had to get along - although often neighborhoods were ethnically homogenous.

God asks us to go beyond our comfort zones in loving the world. As we learn to appreciate those who are different from us, those boundaries can expand. Our child is different from us, our spouse is different from us - they have their own life experience and viewpoint. Our close neighbors are different from us, our congregational members have their own life experiences and viewpoints. Next perhaps we can grant people of color to have their own life experience and point of view, and listen respectfully and hear their concerns. Next perhaps we learn to talk with people of different theologies, or even different faith traditions - and grant them the respect due to them, and hear their ideas without becoming defensive. Next perhaps we learn to listen to all kinds of voices - people from other countries, people with different genders, people who grow up in different economic situations, people of different educational levels,we become able to honor all kinds of differences, and realize that people are people; God loves them all even if their live experience is not like ours. Our love becomes able to encompass more and more diversity, more and more peoples. We realize that God wants them all to be healed, made whole, and brought into Christ's kingdom. God loves each of them as much as God loves us, no exceptions.

The disciple Peter gets confronted by a situation that makes him expand his love when that Gentile guy Cornelius wants him to come preach to a bunch of Gentiles about Jesus. But they're Gentiles! Unclean! Good Jews don't have to do with Gentiles! Then he understood his dream, where God was telling him that if God says these things are clean, they are clean. That's a big change of understanding. Peter and Paul both fight for the rights of Gentiles to believe in Jesus and have the Spirit during their lifetimes - it was a big shift in consciousness.

Interestingly, as Peter's dream challenged him to go beyond his normal circle and extend the love of God to a larger circle, Jesus actually COMMANDS us to love one another in the gospel from John. "What?" we might ask...Love is a feeling, you can't command love. Actually, God can command us to act in love, whether the feeling is yet there or not. We know what love looks like in action: love is caring, love is patient, love is kind, love is long-suffering, love rejoices with one who rejoices and is sad with those who mourn. Love doesn't rejoice at misfortune. Love seeks the good of the other. I'm paraphrasing 1 Corinthians 13, by the way. Love doesn't lie, steal, cheat, kill, abuse or in any other way hurt the loved one. That's paraphrasing the 10 Commandments. Love cares whether someone has a safe bed and house to sleep in; love cares that clever politicians don't constrain the other's ability to vote; love cares that healthcare is available without sending a family into bankruptcy; love doesn't pollute the land others live on; love pays a living wage. Love is very practical in wanting the best for the loved one - and when our circle of loved ones expands, our love leads us to care for a lot of things that affect others even if it doesn't affect us.

Love is what sends us out in mission - caring for the needs of the larger community and the larger world. Yes, we do want to be able to talk about God's love - we also want to make sure that nothing we do gets in the way of folks hearing about God's love - we want to show God's love through our love. Love like this can feel overwhelming, like we can't do it all, we can't love all that much without running out of energy. No, we can't - God's love, however, is bottomless - and God can do more than we ask or think.