

*P Christ is risen!*  
*C He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the risen Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

I want to begin this morning by asking you all to think of that time when you were in love...deeply in love...really impassioned about someone. Perhaps you can think of someone...not romantically, but recall a deep love and respect for someone. Or think of *something* or perhaps someplace that you deeply love. And now think of what you did or what you would do for or because of that person, place, or thing. Now if you are thinking of that person, place, or thing...let me ask you, when you recall your love, do you do things for them or it only because you get something in return? What I am attempting to do is to get you to understand what today's Gospel is revealing to us, and that is that love is not transactional...nor is our faith. In other words, you don't love because you get something of value in return as a result of something of value being given. Love is not a quid pro quo scenario, if I do this for you, then you'll do this for me...no, love is that deep gut affection, that passion, that intimacy, or that commitment toward another person, animal, or an object. Love is and acts as a vital social binder and personal experience, encompassing empathy, selflessness, and a desire for the well-being of the loved one, ranging from romantic love to deep interpersonal bonds.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, when juxtaposed with love, faith contains many of the same characteristics.

Today we hear Jesus saying to us and to the disciples in his Farewell Discourse, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments," [John 14:15]. Let me make what Jesus is saying clear... Jesus is NOT referring to Mosaic Law or the Ten Commandments. Jesus is referring back to the beginning of the Farewell Discourse that started with him getting up from the table and washing the disciples' feet. We heard this back on Maundy Thursday...it is the appointed Gospel lesson that is read every year on Maundy Thursday. Likewise, the washing of the disciples' feet was NOT a transactional act, it was an act of pure love for his disciples that is manifested in humility and service that exemplifies our call as Christians to servanthood and love, which Jesus emphasizes throughout this discourse. When he finishes washing the disciples' feet, we hear Jesus say:

<sup>33</sup> Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.'<sup>34</sup> I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.<sup>35</sup> By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:33-35)

Likewise, when Jesus is questioned by the Sadducees about the resurrection and were silenced by Jesus, the Pharisees heard this and challenged Jesus by asking which of the commandments of the Law is greater? We then hear Jesus respond:

<sup>37</sup> ..."You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.'<sup>38</sup> This is the greatest and first commandment.<sup>39</sup> And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'<sup>40</sup> On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." (Matthew 22:37-40)

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<sup>1</sup> Parts of the explanation of the characteristics of love are from: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Love>

Throughout this Farewell discourse that has turned up in our appointed Gospel lessons over the last few weeks and throughout his ministry, Jesus emphasizes the call to servanthood and love, which Jesus openly and boldly exemplifies. And if we love Jesus the way we say we love Jesus, this is what we do...we love others...if we have the faith, we say we have, this is what we do as people of faith, as children of God...we love others, and NOT just those we choose.

My dear bother and I worked together for years. There was a time that he proudly proclaimed that he had quit smoking but by the end of the night he would be asking others for a cigarette to which I would say to him, "Doug, you didn't quit smoking, you quit buying them." We can tell people that we are a Christian and go to church and that our faith is very important and very strong...we can tell people that we love Jesus, but what do our actions say...NOT in here, but out there? Do our actions nullify our words or even our hearts?

And like I said, Jesus is not making a transactional statement to us...he is not saying if you love me then something good is going to happen to you or for you if you do thus and such...he is saying to us today that if you are the Christian you say you are, if you love Jesus the way you think or say you do...then how is that love manifested...out there? If we have the faith, we say we have, if we love the Lord the way we claim to love the Lord then what does that love look like toward others? Are our words hollow and meaningless or are they supported by our actions? On the other hand, are our actions like our words, empty and transactional?

Unfortunately, Christians struggle to reflect Jesus-like love in our interactions out there and even in here. I too, in my struggles and frustration fall at this command from Jesus. But what I find more frustrating is that we attempt to hide our shortcomings and sin by vailing them in *a love*, or *a faith*, and in a righteousness that is defined, undergirded, and blended into our cultural standards that focus on personal success, competition, or simply surviving the darkness of the culture...by stepping on others to elevate myself. In other words, the transactional benefits we gain from and by our cultural standards are what we base our faith and our love on...making our faith, our love, and our relationships transactional rather than taking opportunities to demonstrate Jesus' love. These opportunities are often missed or watered down to our levels...leaving us to ourselves in a faith and a love that leaves us centered on ourselves and our likes and dislikes...leaving Jesus Christ dead on the cross, end of story. In this, I suppose Jesus does die for nothin'.<sup>2</sup>

In this discourse though, Jesus is teaching the disciples and each of us today that he will not be just a blessed memory that we cling to by retreating into our personal understandings, feelings, and prejudices. Rather, if we love Jesus, if we have faith in Jesus, we do so by continuing his love for others, through the blessed gift of the advocate, or the paraclete. This advocate vitalizes and enlivens the functions of the Holy Spirit within us and enables us to understand in a clearer sense the love and mercy of God through Jesus Christ. This enables us to reveal and share that love with others to the best of our heart's ability. Just as Jesus Christ is an advocate for God by revealing God to us in human form, this advocate is a continuation of Jesus that we reveal through our love and faith toward others...a love and a faith that lifts others and NOT ourselves.

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<sup>2</sup> "Jesus Christ died for nothin, I suppose." From the lyrics of John Prine in, "Sam Stone". John Prine, Atlantic Records, 1971. Published by Walden Music Inc. / Sour Grapes Music ASCAP Big Ears Music, Inc. CD, Track 4.

The Swedish theologian, Andres Nygren, an important theologian who heavily influenced the Rev. DR. Martin Luther King Jr. makes the argument that God's love does not recognize value, but creates it...and that it imparts value by loving. The [person] who is loved by God has not value in themselves; what gives them value is precisely the fact that God loves them / us.<sup>3</sup> It is in this understanding that we hear these famous words from King which I think are even more appropriate for our culture to hear and discern today, when King writes about the racial struggles of that day:

I stressed that the use of violence in our struggle would be both impractical and immoral. To meet hate with retaliatory hate would do nothing but intensify the existence of evil in the universe. Hate begets hate; violence begets violence; toughness begets greater toughness. We must meet the forces of hate with the power of love; we must meet the physical force with soul free. Our aim is not to defeat or humiliate the white man, but to win his friendship and understanding.<sup>4</sup>

King, a little later in this writing quotes Booker T. Washington who says:

Let no man pull you so low as to make you hate him.<sup>5</sup>

Jesus says to us today: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." We have also heard Jesus say, "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Jesus is calling us all to a higher standard, a standard that we all fall short of. But are we being held to such a high standard so that we can simply fall or fail? I don't believe in a god who would set us up for failure. I believe in a God who loves us...a God who is revealed on a cross and uses this cross and this death as the external expression of the length to which this God will go in order to restore each of us from our very brokenness and our inability to love as we have been loved by God. Yes, Jesus sets a high standard, but in doing so Jesus is also showing us a love that goes far beyond our ability and our comprehension, Jesus is showing us that God is love. Listen to what St. John writes in his first epistle:

<sup>7</sup> Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup> Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. <sup>9</sup> God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. <sup>10</sup> In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. <sup>11</sup> Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. <sup>12</sup> No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. <sup>13</sup> By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. <sup>14</sup> And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Saviour of the world. <sup>15</sup> God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. <sup>16</sup> So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. (1 John 4:7-16)

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<sup>3</sup> Washington, James W.. *A Testament of Hope, The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*. New York: Harper Collins, 1986. From the first chapter entitled, "Nonviolence and Racial Justice" under the heading, "Meaning of Love" King explains his use of the word love. This reference to Nygren is from the introduction of King's writing entitled, "An Experiment in Love," page 16.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, page 17, From King's writing entitled, "An Experiment in Love."

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, page 20.

And St. Paul reminds the church in Rome and reminds each of us:

<sup>6</sup>For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. <sup>7</sup>Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. <sup>8</sup>But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. <sup>9</sup>Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. <sup>10</sup>For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. <sup>11</sup>But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. (Romans 5:6-11)

Yes, Christ died for the ungodly, you and I, but not to show us how sinful or unworthy we are, God's is NOT transactional, Christ died to show us how deeply God loves us. Yes, Christ has died, but he is risen and because he is risen, we too are risen indeed. Alleluia.

*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*