

Eighteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time: Unconditional Love

Today's readings point us to a reflection of the Love of our God. In the first reading, from Isaiah, the first part of which is proclaimed at the Solemn Easter Vigil, we hear the Lord calling us to Himself:

*"All you who are thirsty, come to the water! You who have no money, come, receive grain and eat;
Come, without paying and without cost, drink wine and milk!....
Heed me, and you shall eat well, you shall delight in rich fare.
Come to me heedfully, listen, that you may have life."*

Our God is calling us to himself, calling us to everlasting happiness, calling us into his love. In the beginning of the Gospel reading Jesus heard about the death of John the Baptist. He goes off on his own, perhaps to mourn, perhaps to consider the mystery of the Father's plan, certainly to pray. But He is called out of prayer by people who need Him, people He loved even if their own kind had killed John. He cures their sick; He preaches to their hearts, and then he feeds them. He feeds us. He feeds the emptiness of our hearts. He does this because He loves us.

And His Love is overwhelming. *"Nothing can separate us from the love of God,"* St. Paul says in the second reading, nothing that the world throws at us, no evil assault, not even death itself can keep us from the love of God.

God loves us with an unconditional love. You have heard this many times. What does it mean? He loves us for whom we are, not for what we do. He loves each of us because He sees in each of us a unique reflection of His image and likeness. This is a fundamental truth of Christianity. We are loved.

As human beings we often feel alone in the world. Even a busy mother with children pulling on her nonstop has times that she feels alone in the middle of the hustle of the house, but she is not alone. Older people consider the deaths of so many of their friends and relatives and feel very alone in the world. "Why am I still here?" they ask. But they are not alone. They are here because God still wants others to experience His love in them. Children and Teens often feel alone. "No one understands me," they are convinced. They are right, no one in this world understands any of us. But God understands us. We are not alone. We are loved.

All that God wants from us is that we turn towards His love. He wants us to acknowledge His love and live in His love. Come to the water and drink.

"But I have offended God," you say. *He has called me to fly, but I have chosen to stay inside*, that's from the Sidewalk Prophets, a contemporary Christian Group.

And yet, He still loves us. He forgives us when we seek his mercy. And his mercy is greater than we could possibly comprehend. God does not forgive like human beings forgive.

Because we are living in an imperfect world, our forgiving others must contain elements of protection or prevention from being hurt again. For example, you remember the horrible events in Utah years ago when the Smart family, a deeply religious family, gave a job working on their home to a man who then kidnaped and brutalized their fourteen year old daughter, Elizabeth. She was found nine months later, and the man is in prison. I'm sure the family has forgiven him, but they would not hire him again should he be released. Or another more common example, a child tells her parents that she is going over to a friends house, but instead is caught at a concert her parents specifically forbade her from attending. She is contrite. Her parents forgive her, but they add, rightly so, "Now you need to earn our trust back." They want to protect her. Their demand that she earn their trust is a way of doing this. This is acceptable for human beings.

God's love is so much greater than this. He forgives us, but never puts us on probation. We don't have to earn his trust back. We just have to live in his love. Another example, far closer to home, a number of years ago I spent a few days in Washington, DC. I was assaulted about 9 in the morning as I left Mass and walked across a square on my way back to my hotel for breakfast. No kidding. I heard someone running up to me, and when I turned around, a rather strong looking man had his hands around my neck, choking me and demanding money. Now, I got away, my Guardian Angel gave me a self defense move I never knew I had, and I was shocked that I could still run. I was not injured. I've forgiven the man, but there is this limit to my forgiveness--I doubt I'll ever return to Washington, DC, or at least will never go there alone again. That to me seems reasonable. It is a matter of my own protection. But the Lord is assaulted by us continually when we push him aside and choose immorality. He not only forgives us. He comes back to us, hoping that we will return His love rather than once more turn from Him. *"I am the thorn in your crown, but you love me anyway. I am the nail in your wrist, but you love me anyway. With sin in my heart I tried to bury your grace, and then, alone in the night, I called out to you, so ashamed of my life, and you love me anyway,"* again, the Sidewalk Prophets.

We cannot comprehend how much God loves us. What we can do is live in His love, enjoy His love. *"As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and remain in His love."* John 15-9 10.

His Love is more powerful than the world and anything the world attempts to throw at us. St. Paul's inspired words in Romans 8 assures us:

"What will separate us from the love of Christ. Will anguish, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword? No, in all these things we conquer overwhelmingly through him who loved us.

*For I am convinced that neither death, nor life,
nor angels, nor principalities,
nor present things, nor future things,
nor powers, nor height, nor depth,
nor any other creature will be able to separate us
from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” ©CCLI License #2368115*

Attacks from terrorists can kill us but not destroy us. Attacks on our Catholic way of life can marginalize us in society, but they cannot kill us. Sickness can weaken our physical lives, but we remain strong in the Lord's powerful love. Loneliness might isolate us, but in reality we are never alone.

Our God is always with us. He loves us. Unconditionally.