

## The Courage to Love

Trinity Sunday Sermon, May 26, 2013

St. Martin's Episcopal Church, Williamsburg, VA

Who would have the courage to love, if not for love?

Who would be able to love, if not for God's love?

The events of this past week alone would give us cause to falter, a reason to feel the fragility of life, to hurt at being witness to another person's pain. We need only see the mess of toothpicks, where once houses stood in Moore, Oklahoma to feel pain on behalf of another person. We need only see the distraught parents of the British soldier, to feel their grief and, perhaps, feel our own fear at what terrorism and fanaticism can do. We need only hear the debates about how peaceful Islam is --or is not -- to summon the memory of how Christianity was used in the historical past to justify the killing of others. And if we reflect, we realize that these debates aren't really about religion but about what people do when they are afraid and how, when people are afraid, they prioritize their own needs and desires more highly than they do the good of other people.

And into this moment of pain and fear and anger, there's Jesus, saying "Love your enemies Do good to those who hate you" (Luke 6:27).

O God,

why did Jesus have to say this?

Why does he make being a disciple so hard?

Surely God cannot be expecting us to act the way Jesus did(!)

But then Paul and his followers come along and affirm that yes, in fact, this is the expectation: that the disciples of each generation would do as Jesus did. "Bless, bless and do not curse them" (Romans 12:14).

This is a hard instruction. As someone once said to Jesus, "Master, this is a difficult instruction."

Following this instruction to bless and not curse takes determination and courage.

We would, none of us, have the courage to love, if it weren't for God's love for us, which has been made known to us in Christ Jesus.

I've chosen to preach on today's passage from The Letter to the Romans because it's something we can cling to. In fact, this passage can save your life. It is the Bible equivalent of the AED on the wall of the entryway. If your heart went erratic and your spouse wanted you to have help, we'd crack that unit open, and it would walk us through instructions that would lead to your heart beating regularly again.

In a similar way, this passage from Romans is life-saving. Listen to it: "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." It's life-saving because we know we need love to survive, yet we do not have enough love in ourselves naturally to love this world, a world in which humanity has distorted and destroyed the creatures of God. No matter how nice, or compassionate or generous each of us is, none of us naturally have the love it takes to love Michael Adebolajo and Michael Adebowale or the Boston bombers. And on this Memorial Day weekend, as we remember those persons who have died in the service of our nation, we none of us have, by natural means, enough love in our hearts to love the enemies that killed them.

God knows this about us. God knows we do not have enough love. God also knows that we might not *want* to practice this kind of love, even if we were aware we had it. But who we are, by nature, doesn't change who God is. God, as it turns out, is pretty stubborn. He knows that "love your enemies" is hard, yet he refuses to make the standard any easier. So, instead of changing the standard, God gives us the gift that makes it possible for us to live the standard. God sends us his very own power, who is the Son, to show us how to love, even when we're being crucified. And then, since God knows that we have short memories, that

we forget the things we learn, God sends us the Holy Spirit, to eternally supply us with love even when we do not wish to love.

I guarantee you that God gives us the love to love our enemies. As I said, God proved this on the cross of crucifixion: Jesus voluntarily died not just for those who loved him but for also for those who hated him, so that, eventually all might be one as Jesus and the Father are one. So the question is not whether we've got the love. OK, you may not *feel* the love, but anyone who's married knows you have to love even when you *don't* feel the love, if you want that relationship to survive. Love is a decision as much as it is a feeling. The most helpful question is whether we have the *courage* to love, or, to put it another way, whether we have the courage to *practice the love that God has given us*.

I'm aware that this sermon might not be the most attractive recruiting message for Christianity.

If the recruiting jingle for the Army is "Be, all that you can be," The Letter to the Romans jingle might be, "Be, all that you are not."

Not very catchy, is it?

But this, in fact, is the message of Christianity.

You will be your best, most authentic self when you practice the power of God to love, when you do not feel love.

And to practice this love, you will need the courage that comes from the Holy Spirit.

You will need the determination to go against your human nature and not be self-protective, but instead be self-giving, even when someone threatens you.

This means you will sometimes suffer, as did our Lord Jesus.

This means you will have to practice endurance.

But having practiced endurance, you will become strong enough to be people of hope,

to hope in the hope that never dials us.

So accept the courage God offers you today,

the courage to love beyond all measure, as the transformed daughters and sons of God.

Have the courage to love, even as you are loved by God. Amen.