

Palm Sunday

Trinity Church, March 25, 2018

The hymn text we have just
sung expresses so beautifully the
joy of loving our Lord solely
because of God's love for us.

“I love thee, Lord, but not
because

I hope for heaven
thereby,

nor yet, for fear that loving
not

I might for ever die;
but for that thou didst all the
world

upon the cross embrace;

for us didst bear the nails and
spear,

and manifold disgrace,
and griefs and torments
numberless,

and sweat of agony;
e'en death itself; and all for
one

who was thine enemy.

Then why, most loving Jesus
Christ,

should I not love thee
well,

not for the sake of winning
heaven,

nor any fear of hell;

not with the hope of gaining
aught,

not seeking a reward;
but as thyself has loved me,
O ever-loving Lord!

E'en so I love thee, and will
love,

and in thy praise will
sing,

solely because thou art my
God

and my eternal King.

(Hymn 682, text 17th Century
Spanish)

This text expresses the love
we would hope to have for God – a
love so pure that it is offered

without any expectation of a reward. The Beloved is worthy of praise in thanksgiving for the selfless giving of Jesus' life to express God's love. Unlike many relationships, there is no bargaining. God does not put conditions on God's love that require a favorable response from us. And we don't bargain with God in order to get something. Love is love's finest response, freely given and freely received.

In some religious circles the motivation for loving God is based on fear. It is thought that if I don't love God, God will hurt me.

Perhaps you have seen signs that say, “Get right or get left.” The implication is that if you don’t turn your life over to Jesus you’ll be left behind at the rapture to face the consequences of the Antichrist. Another sign I’ve seen reads, “Plan ahead. It wasn’t raining when Noah built the ark.” Again, turn your life around while you still have a chance or you’ll drown in your sin.

It is true that all of us need to turn our lives away from the destructive forces we encounter, and “whenever we fall into sin, to repent and return to the Lord.” God

seeks to heal our wounds and to restore us to a state of grace. But God does not force this choice. Love to be true must be free. It must include the option of a “yes” or a “no”. God’s choice was to express unconditional love for us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. It was a love so profound that from the cross we are forgiven for our sins and ignorance:

“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

(Luke 23:34) It was a gift that can restore us when we feel like Adam and Eve thrown out of the Garden of Eden. Even in our weakness and

failure God continues to see us as created – as good...as if we were still in that garden. Love is offered...with or without correct belief...in obedience and disobedience. Love is faithful and will go to any lengths to woo us to divine union -- even to death on a cross.

So endless is this love that Jesus experienced the plight of the abandoned lover. In his poetry, John of the Cross pictured Jesus as a “young shepherd...alone and grave, alien to joy and happiness, and (while) thinking of his shepherdess his heart is sorely hurt

by love. He doesn't weep at being lost in love or wakening to pain, although his heart is sorely maimed; he weeps thinking he is forgot.

Merely the thought that his sweet friend forgot him is a painful sword. The shepherd cries: 'O misery of her distance from my love, and she no longer cares to be near me! My heart is sorely hurt by love!'

A long time passed; he climbed the branches of a tree and spread his lovely arms, and dead lay hanging from his arms; his heart was sorely hurt by love."

As the Gospel of John puts it,
“He came to what was his own,
and his own people did not accept
him.” (John 1:11)

We too hurt the divine lover
by abandoning love. Perhaps we
forget to see the lover in our joys,
and return only as the lover shares
our suffering. No doubt the
Beloved’s cries have been heard as
tanks and machine guns take aim.
Tears flowed when the Lover’s kin
were shoved into gas chambers,
when cries from mental hospitals
and incurable patient wards linger
through the night. The abandoned
lover weeps our tears at the police

station and emergency room, when a parent's lust crushes a child's spirit, when the "righteous" refuse to share sacred meals with those who differ from themselves.

The one whose heart was sorely hurt by love continues to love. His arms remain outstretched to embrace us all, not only with forgiveness for past failures, but in compassionate love for us in the present. God sees us with "compassionate eyes, making the ocean of blessings limitless."
(Thich Nhat Hanh) Compassion is God's nature. Retribution happens when we tire of loving. The

Beloved, however, never grows
weary even in sadness, but
continues to uphold us and to
forgive -- freeing us to find within
our selves the “heartbeat of God.”

Is this not what our response
to Love is meant to be – to love
without seeking a reward – to love
not for winning heaven, nor for
fear of hell – but solely because of
Love’s embrace?