

The 6th Sunday of Easter
May 17, 2020
St. Paul's, Wilmington, NC
A Sermon by the Rev. Raymond J Hanna

If you think that you have found love in the eyes of a stranger, you might want to take a chance and, using proper physical distancing, of course, introduce yourself by asking one of the following questions: "Do you believe in love at first sight or should I walk by again?" You might also try asking: "Is there an airport nearby, or is that just my heart taking off?" If those fail, here are two other possibilities. "If I could re-write the alphabet, I would put you and I together. And my favorite, "are you a parking ticket, because you've got fine written all over you?" Rest assured, I have not, nor would I ever, use any of those lines. Despite their corniness, they underscore the need we all have to love and be loved. Way back in 1965, Hal David, who was not a theologian as far as I know, wrote the lyrics to the famous song: "What the world needs now is love, sweet love." David understood that love is like spiritual DNA. A leading anthropologist at Rutgers University goes so far as to say, "the desire for love is even stronger than the will to survive. We live for love; we die for love; sometimes, sadly, we even kill for love."

The apostle Paul tells us that without love, we are nothing. We are empty, we are but a clanging cymbal. A few weeks ago in the gospel appointed for Maundy Thursday, Jesus says to his disciples, "I give you a new commandment that you love one another, as I have loved you. By this love everyone will know that you are my disciples." In case they didn't get it the first time, Jesus reminds them again of the centrality of love. In our reading from John's gospel today, Jesus says: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. Because obeying the commandments is so important and so hard to do, Jesus offers us a coach, an advocate, a guiding spirit, by giving us the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth— that which gives us life itself. We can feel it with each breath we take.

However, as we go through life, we discover that some people are easier to love than others. I suspect that Jesus would not have made the practice of love a commandment, if it weren't for those pesky, irritating people whom we find so hard to love. It is easy to love those who love us, but not easy to love those who have hurt us, or stolen from us, or used us, or abused us, or taken advantage of the defenseless, or promoted racism, or prejudice, or violence, or inequality. It is not easy to love those people who have done nothing wrong, other than simply getting on our nerves. Someone said to me recently, that we must love everyone, but it is okay to love some at a distance. Love your enemies at a distance, love those who cannot forgive you at a distance. Love those you struggle to forgive at a distance. But love them none the less, because in God's love we live and move and have our being.

In the reading from Acts this morning, Paul says that there is an instinct within us that hungers to find meaning and purpose and love. He says that we are designed to grope for God, to reach out and find God, and when we find God, we discover that God is not an inert idol (like pride, or money, or power), but God is indeed the one in whom we live and move and have our being.

There is an old joke which says that if Moses were an Episcopalian, he would have come down from Mount Sinai with the 10 suggestions, instead of the 10 commandments. Here are some ideas, you do whatever you want with them. Jesus wants us to obey the commandments, not because they are punitive, but because, in keeping them, we experience God's grace. As we observe the commandments, we experience life as a gift, to be celebrated, and cherished. If you have ever attended an Episcopal church that was built in colonial times, you may have noticed that the 10 Commandments are displayed in a prominent place next to the altar. The

commandments are divided into two sections, numbers 1-4, are called the apodictic commandments, and numbers 5-10 are called the casuistic commandments.

I know that you have these committed to memory, but if you are having a brain freeze, I'll remind you that the casuistic commandments begin with: "Honor your father and mother. Do not murder. Do not commit adultery. Do not steal. Do not lie. Do not covet." These commandments are based on case law—they set precedent for what is considered to be acceptable behavior in a civilized society. They are not unique to Judaism or Christianity. They are part of the fabric of civilized societies everywhere. What is most important, and most unique, about the 10 commandments are the apodictic commandments. Apodictic means: God-given, absolute, self-evident, "like we hold these truths to be self-evident that all people are created equal." In other words, there are to be no questions asked, no exceptions made. "You shall have no other gods, but me. You shall not worship any other gods. You shall not take God's name in vain. Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy." Set it apart from ordinary time to remind you of who you are and to whom you belong. Jesus takes the apodictic commandments and puts them into one sentence which he calls the first and great commandment. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself." It is an apodictic commandment, self-evident, absolute, no questions asked, no exceptions made. Love is not a choice, our lives depend on it. So even if we have to love at a distance, we must love one another. Love is like breath, without we die.

In these unprecedented times in which we live, it feels like some folks are trying to suffocate us. Our lack of love and compassion for others is making us feel like an asthmatic trying to catch his breath. The good news is that there is very effective treatment, 100% guaranteed treatment. The more we love as Jesus commands us to love, the more we love others, the more we love and care for ourselves in life giving ways, the more we care for the needs of others, the more we begin to realize that the breath of God is inside of us. The Advocate, the guide, the coach, the sustainer, the encourager is just a breath away. Sometimes in our sinful moments, in our disobedient moments, we are like stubborn children who hold their breath, trying to get our own way. St. Augustine said: "one who is filled with love, is filled with God himself." We cannot love without God. So claim that love in the eyes of a stranger, in the embrace of a loved one, in the forgiveness of an enemy, or in ministry to the poor, the homeless, the fearful, in a zoom call, or a text of concern. Jesus calls us to love one another. You might remember that folk song, "they will know we are Christians by our love." Love one another as Jesus loves you. It's apodictic, it's absolute, it's self-evident, it's non-negotiable, it's the only way to live the way God created us to live. Amen