

The Seventh Sunday of Easter

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Acts 1:15-17, 20a, 20c-26
<i>Response</i>	The Lord has established his throne in the heavens
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 103:1-2, 11-12, 19-20
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 John 4:11-16
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you.
<i>Gospel</i>	John 17:11b-19

Alright, the seventh Sunday of Easter for year B takes us to 1 John 4:11-16. And here John continues to engage in what might be called an extended meditation on *agapē*, an extended meditation on love. And in this instance, he's reflecting on the implications of God's love for our love of neighbor. So 1 John 4:11, we read these words:

Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No man has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his own Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. So we know and believe the love God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.¹

Once again, John (very simple) has a lot of repetition, the same words. His sentences are very simple, straightforward, in terms of their form. Yet, there are profound mysteries that are being taught with every line.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

So, a few points about those words. First, he says:

Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

Now here, he's following up directly on the previous verses from the sixth Sunday of Easter in year B where he said that God has manifested His love to us through the Incarnation, through sending His son, and through the cross...through His expiation for our sins on Calvary. And the upshot or the implication of those two mysteries of the Incarnation and the Passion is that if God loved *us* so much that He became man, and that He died on the cross, then we also ought to love one another.

In other words, our love of neighbor is a direct result of God's love of us. In other words, Christians are called to what later spiritual writers will call the *Imitatio Dei*, the "Imitation of God." So if God is love, and He loved us with this kind of total, life-giving, sacrificial love, then we are called to love our neighbor in the same way. We're called to imitate God through the love of one another. And now he says:

No man has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. (1 John 4:12)

Now this is really powerful. You'll see this theme over and over again in the Old Testament, that no man can see God and live. So Moses for example, in Exodus 33 and 34, he's up on Mount Sinai:

Moses said, "I pray thee, show me thy glory." (Exodus 33:18)

He wants to see the essence of God. He wants to see God *as* He is, in His divine power and glory. And God says, no:

... for man shall not see me and live."

However, He says:

... and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.” (Exodus 33:22-23)

... which would be a kind of biblical, Semitic way of referring to person of God, His essence. He can see the power of God, His back, but not His face. And that will happen over and over again in the Old Testament. So what John is saying is:

No man has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. (1 John 4:12)

In other words, if we love our neighbor the way God loved us, the way Christ loved us, there's a real sense in which we manifest the love of God in the world. We make it possible to see God, in a certain sense, through revealing the love of God that abides in us as we abide in Christ.

So this, of course, is the power and example of the saints. Why are the saints so alluring? Why are they so powerful? Why are they so fascinating? Well, when people see someone like St. Francis of Assisi or St. Teresa of Calcutta, they see the love of God alive in the world. They see the kind of love that isn't just an ordinary human love. It's a divine love, and it provides a kind of window into the world through a human being of an invisible divine love that human nature and the human body just can't see visibly, because God is pure spirit. We can't see Him with our bodily eyes, but when Christians who are in Christ manifest the love of God in the world through their actions, through their charity, through their holiness, they make the invisible love of God visible. That's what John here is calling us to. Now he says:

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his own Spirit. (1 John 4:13)

So here, we see again that imagery of mutual indwelling. This is why John is called a mystic, if you've ever wondered about that. Sometimes people get a little nervous if you talk about mysticism. I think it was John Henry Neuman who had a famous

quip. He said mysticism begins in “myst” and it ends in “schism” — the idea that mystics are a little odd and a little dangerous, and they can go off the rails easily. Alright, so they begin with darkness and obscurity, and they sometimes often end in schism, division within the Church.

That was just a kind of tongue-in-cheek statement, but there is a real sense in which mysticism — authentic mysticism — comes from the Greek word *mysterion*. *Mysterion* means “something hidden”, so the mystic focuses on that which is hidden, which is invisible. And the most hidden and most invisible thing is the mystery of who God is in Himself, because we can’t see it. We can’t taste it. We can’t touch it. We can’t smell it. None of our senses have access to it, so when John says:

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us... (1 John 4:13a)

He’s using the language of mysticism, because what the mystics do throughout the centuries — whether it’s Teresa of Avila or John of the Cross or Catherine of Siena — they focus on, in their writings and their teachings, union with God. It’s on union, the invisible union with the invisible God — the mutual indwelling of the invisible God in the human soul, in the human heart.

So when John here is saying we abide in Him, that’s the language of mysticism. It’s the language of union and mutual indwelling. And the principal master of the mystical life is the Holy Spirit Himself, the invisible Spirit of God that dwells in the soul.

So John is using the language of mysticism to describe what it means to love God and above all, to love our neighbor too. That’s the context here. If God’s loved us, so we have to love our neighbor. And we do this through the power of the Holy Spirit that dwells in us. And he continues:

And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. (1 John 4:14-15)

This is important too. The mysticism of St. John in the letter of John is no bland, blasé, general mysticism. It's a specifically Christian mysticism, because it doesn't just presuppose that you love. That's essential. It also presupposes the supernatural virtue of faith. If you want to abide in God, you have to confess that Jesus is the Son of God. If you confess Jesus as Son of God, God abides in Him and He in God.

This is very, very crucial. This is the same kind of mysticism you find in Paul too. How is it that we become members of the Mystical Body of Christ? That's Pauline language, a Pauline term; it's only found in Paul. Well, it's through dying and rising with Christ in Baptism and faith. Through faith and Baptism, we die to this world, and we rise with Christ, and we're made members of His Body.

Well, John uses the language of "abiding" to describe the same mystery. And you don't have access, you don't abide in Christ unless you confess that Jesus is the Son of God. So faith unites us to Christ ... and love, faith and love. It's both those things together. It's not just an abstract love. It's the love of God revealed for the world in Christ, the love of Christ revealed for humanity in the cross, and then our union with Him through love in faith and then — John doesn't mention Baptism here, but He mentioned being born of God earlier.

So it is a sacramental mysticism as well. And then he says:

So we know and believe the love God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. (1 John 4:16)

So once again, this image of mutual indwelling... I think it's something we need to pause and really ponder: "Wait, so John is saying that if I have faith in Christ, and I love God, then the God of the universe abides in me. And I somehow abide in Him." Yes.

So what are the implications — what implications does that have for how you live as a Christian, if God is dwelling in you at every moment of every day? If the God of the universe has made His home in you through His Spirit, then you are by definition a living, breathing, walking temple... which means you are sacred,

which means you're holy, *and* which means you are set apart from sin and from the things of this world that are not of God.

So it has profound implications for the moral life of the Christian. Again, we tend to separate mysticism and morality. So mysticism is what you do when you're alone and you're praying. And then morality is what you do when you're kind of out and about and moving around the world. No. The moral life flows out of the mystical life in Christ, the mystical union with Christ that comes through faith and love, the union of love.

So, I could go on, but I want to actually quote a mystic from the Church, St. Catherine of Siena. Because there's a verse in this that really stuck out to me in 1 John 4:12. After saying we ought to love one another — in other words, love of neighbor — he says that:

... if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. (1 John 4:12b)

So this is interesting. John says that God's love is perfected in us in a special way, through the love of our neighbor. Now, why would he say that? There's a passage in St. Catherine of Siena. This is a copy of her book *The Dialogue*. It's a classic work of mysticism. Catherine is writing in the late 14th century, so she's a medieval mystic, Dominican nun. And she, in her *Dialogue*, it's basically the recording of a long conversation (a long dialogue) between her and Christ. So the risen Christ comes to Catherine, and He speaks to her, and then she responds. And they have this long dialogue about the spiritual life, about the interior life of the soul.

And there's one paragraph in *Dialogue* 64, where Jesus explains to St. Catherine why love of neighbor is the perfection of charity. Because some of us might think, "No, no, no, no, no. I need to love God first. That's the most important thing. And then if I get around to it, I'll love my neighbor. Or if they don't annoy me too much, I'll love my neighbor. As long as I love God, I'm fine."

Well, not quite. Listen to what Jesus says to Catherine in the *Dialogue*:

[Jesus says to Catherine:] *“I ask you to love me with the same love with which I love you. But for me you cannot do this, for I loved you without being loved. Whatever love you have for me you owe me, so you love me not gratuitously but out of duty, while I love you not out of duty but gratuitously.* So you cannot give me the kind of love I ask of you. This is why I have put you among your neighbors: so that you can do for them what you cannot do for me—that is, love them without any concern for thanks and without looking for any profit for yourself. And whatever you do for them I will consider done for me. [cf. Matt 25:40]...

And of course, that’s an allusion to the parable of the sheep and the goat. What you’ve done to the least one of these, you’ve done to me. So press pause here for a second with a quote from Catherine.

What is Jesus saying to Catherine of Siena? What He’s saying is, the most perfect form of love is not the kind of love that flows out of duty, where you owe someone love. The most perfect form of love is gratuitous love, where you love someone who doesn’t deserve it. And what Jesus says is, we can’t love Him in the way He loves us, because He loves us gratuitously, but our love for God can only ever be out of duty. It can only ever be something we owe, because He’s given us everything, and we owe Him everything.

So in order for love to actually be perfected in us, in order for us to love the way God loves, we have to have an object of our love who is completely undeserving of that love. Whereas God deserves our love and infinitely more, we need to have an object of love that is undeserving. And so, Jesus says, “That’s why I gave you your neighbors. That’s why I gave you your family. That’s why I gave you the people you work with. That’s why I gave you the people under whose political power you may live” — your governor, your mayor, your president, whatever it might be. The human world that surrounds us is the opportunity for the perfection of charity in us, because if it was only us and God, we could only ever love Him with the love that He deserves. But for us to love someone who doesn’t deserve it, we *have* to have a neighbor.

And that's why Jesus says He gives us our neighbors around us to do for them what we cannot do for Him. And that's why Matthew 25 (in the parable of the sheep and the goats), Jesus says at the evening of life, we'll be judged by our love. Well, actually, St. John of the Cross says that, but that's the upshot of the parable. How are the sheep and the goat judged? The only criteria given in there is whether they loved their neighbor or not:

I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me. (Matthew 25:36)

And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.' (Matthew 25:40)

Love of neighbor enables us to love God gratuitously *through* those we serve, whether it's our spouses, our children, our religious community, our parish (if you're a priest), our diocese (if you're a bishop), and the world. This is why holiness is possible no matter what your state in life. It's why you don't have to live in a consecrated celibate state or consecrated religious state in order to be holy, to achieve the perfection of charity, because every one of us has a neighbor that we can love with the love that Christ loved us.

So Jesus is revealing a profound mystery to Catherine of Siena here. And it's a very challenging one, because it helps us to realize that all those neighbors we so easily consider annoyances or obstacles to us, are in fact precisely the opportunities that God gives us to grow in love and have love perfected in us through charity.

Now...pretty inspiring, pretty challenging, beautiful stuff — St. Catherine of Siena. Wow. Now Jesus doesn't stop there. He never does. He also goes on to kind of drive home the point, so one last thing. He continues to Catherine; He says:

Do you know how you can tell when your spiritual love is not perfect? If you are distressed when it seems that those you love are not returning your love or not loving you as much as you think you love them. Or if you are distressed when it seems to you that you are being deprived of their company or comfort, or that they love someone else more than you. From

these and from many other things you should be able to tell if your love for me and for your neighbors is still imperfect...”²

So in other words, what Jesus is saying to Catherine is, if you love your neighbor expecting something in return or if you’re distressed when they don’t love you as much as you think you deserve or as much as you wish they loved you, you’re still not loving perfectly. Because as Paul says:

But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

So God loves the world, Paul says, as Christ loves us when we *didn’t* love Him, when we hated Him, when our lives were opposed to Him. So in order for us to have love perfected in us like Christ’s love is perfect, we have to love those who *don’t* love us in return. And that’s why, in the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus says to his disciples:

You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5:48)

The preceding verses give one command, and that command is:

...Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you... (Matthew 5:44)

That’s the perfection Jesus is calling us to. It’s one thing to love those who love you — that’s good. To love those who hate you, that’s perfect, and that’s the perfection of charity that St. John is talking about in his first letter.

² Catherine of Siena, *Dialogue* 64; cf. Matt 25:40