

The Sixth Sunday of Easter

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Acts 10:25-26, 34-35, 44-48
<i>Response</i>	[H]e has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 98:1, 2-3, 3-4
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 John 4:7-10
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Jesus answered him, “If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.
<i>Gospel</i>	John 15:9-17

The sixth Sunday of Easter for year B takes us to one of the most famous — probably the most famous — verse in the first letter of St. John: God is love. *Deus caritas est...* famous title of the encyclical of Pope Benedict XVI on the love of God. So the reading for today is short, but like everything else in 1 John, very rich in its implication. First glance simple, but profound in its depth. So let’s look at 1 John 4:7-10, which says these words:

Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God; for God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins.¹

Once again, as you read these short verses, you’ll notice how simple John is. It’s not very complicated. He has one of the most basic vocabularies out of any letter or any book in the New Testament. So a lot of times when professors want to teach

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.

Greek to their first-year Greek students, many New Testament Greek textbooks will start with 1 John. It's very simple, very basic vocabulary.

Yet at the same time, this is one of the most profound mysteries of any passage in the New Testament. What does it mean to say that God is love? And what is John saying here when he talks about the manifestation of the love of God and how someone who does not love doesn't know God?

So in order to answer these questions, what I want to do is just kind of walk through these verses very carefully and lean a little on some help from two great Doctors of the Church, St. Augustine and especially St. Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa Theologica*, just to give you a few points to consider as we move through this. First point, verse 7:

Beloved, let us love one another...

What does that mean, "let us love one another"? Well, the Greek word for love — the Greek verb, *agapaó* and the noun is *agapē* — has a wide range of meanings. And whenever you look at it in the New Testament, you really want to look at the context if you want to establish exactly what the word *agapē* means. And we've already seen (in a previous reading from the lectionary) that when John talks about *agapē*, about love, he explicitly links it to the kind of love Jesus showed on the cross. So in John 13, He gives a new commandment to His disciples, to love one another as He has loved them. And later on in that discourse to the disciples at the Last Supper, Jesus is going to say:

Greater [*agapē*] has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. (John 15:13)

So in the Gospel of John, *agapē* has a sacrificial connotation to it. The idea of laying down one's life, of suffering for the sake of the salvation of another, for the sake of another. So when John begins here by saying "let us love one another", he's speaking about Christ-like love. He's speaking about sacrificial love. He's speaking about this *agapē*, this self-giving love.

And then he goes on to say that this kind of love is “of God” — in other words, it’s from God. And whoever loves like that — sacrificially, Christ-like — is born of God and knows God. So those two images here — born of God and knows God — also echo the Gospel of John. You think of Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus:

Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” (John 3:5)

And eventually Jesus will go on in context, and the Church will make clear too, that He’s just speaking about the rebirth through the Spirit that takes place in Baptism. So to be born of God is to be given the supernatural life of God that comes through the power of the water and the Spirit of Baptism. And then to know God doesn’t just mean an intellectual understanding of God. It means union with God.

That’s one of those terms to know that both in the Gospel of John and in the letter of John has multiple layers of meaning. We tend to use it just of thinking ... just with reference to thinking or intellectual knowledge, but John (following the Old Testament) uses it on a deeper level also to refer to intimacy with God... like intimate knowledge of who God is and what God has done in relationship with God.

Now, John continues. He says:

He who does not love...

And here think again of the sacrificial love of Christ...

...does not know God; for God is love. (1 John 4:8)

So this is an enormous statement. This is like a thunder cloud, even though it’s such a short verse. Whoever does not love does not know God. That is a profound statement. But it follows up from what John has said earlier in his letter, when he said that if we keep the commandment of Christ to love, we will abide in Him and He will abide in us.

Conversely, if we break the commandment to love, so if we fail to love or if we (God forbid) begin to hate our neighbor, we can't abide in God. In fact, if we hate someone, we don't even know God, John says. We have no real relationship with God. Why? How can he make such a dramatic claim? Because — or for — God is love. Or in Greek, he says *ho Theos agapē estin*. *Ho theos* — we get the word theology from that. *Theos* is the Greek transliteration. God, *theos ... agapē*, love ... *estin*. God love is, is actually the order of the words, or *deus caritas est* in Latin.

So in other words, John's moral teaching about a person who hates or failing to love, not knowing God, flows out of his (forgive me) metaphysics, his ontology, his philosophy of being. What is God? Who is God? God *is agapē*. God *is* love, and we're going to trace out what that means in just a minute with a little help from St. Augustine and from the *Catechism*.

Okay, so how does this all play out in a concrete way, this metaphysical, ontological, philosophical statement about God — He is love? John goes on. He says:

In this the love of God was made manifest among us...

So in other words, the way God showed us, showed humanity that He is love is twofold. Number one, the Incarnation:

...that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him.

And then number two:

In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins.

So what are the two ways God shows us in the world and in history that He is love? It's through the mystery of the Incarnation, the sending of His Son, and

through the mystery of the Passion, of the Paschal Mystery... through the death of His Son by which He reconciled the world to Himself.

So in other words, John doesn't remain at the level of a kind of metaphysical statement about the being of God. He takes it down to salvation history, and he says he has revealed this mystery of the fact that He is love to us through sending His Son in the Incarnation and sending His Son to die for our sins in the Passion and death — these two great moments in salvation history.

That's just a basic kind of explanation of his words. Now let's look at the living tradition for just a moment to kind of deepen our understanding of these words. So the first thing I would want to say is if we turn to St. Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica*, which I've mentioned before, Thomas helps us by giving a definition of love that's going to be really foundational for understanding what it means to say that God is love and how the Incarnation and the Passion reveal God's love.

So in the *Summa Theologica*, question 20, article 2, part 1 — well, it's part 1, question 20, article 2... actually article 1. At the end of that article, he defines love — *caritas* in Latin or *agapē* in Greek. He says:

...to love a person is to wish that person good.

Or some translations have “to will the good for another.”

So again, notice how for Thomas, love isn't an emotion first and foremost. It's a choice. It's an act of the will to choose the good for another. And that's exactly what God does, St. Thomas says, in the Incarnation and in the Passion.

How so? Well, let me give you two quotes from St. Thomas. This is fantastic. In the *Summa*, Thomas has these two articles where he deals with whether the Incarnation was really necessary ... or whether God could have revealed Himself in some other way. And he also has a question about whether the Passion of Christ is really necessary for our salvation or whether He could have saved humanity in some other way.

And in both instances, he says, “Of course. God could have revealed Himself and saved humanity through some other means than the Incarnation and the Passion of Christ in the Crucifixion.” Because He’s omnipotent. He’s all powerful. He could do it any way He chose. But the reason He saves the world through the Incarnation and through the Passion is because both of these mysteries best and most fully reveal the love of God for humanity. So just take this in. Listen to these words of St. Thomas with regard to the Incarnation. He says this:

It seems that it was not necessary for the reparation of the human race that the Word of God should become incarnate... *For God of His omnipotent power could have restored human nature in many other ways...*

Alright, pause there. He’s right. He goes on to say God could have simply declared all of humanity to be saved, and we would be. He has that power, and He has that right. But it’s not how He does it. Why? Thomas continues:

[However,] Augustine says (*De Trin.* xiii.): *Nothing was so necessary for raising our hope as to show us how deeply God loved us. And what could afford us a stronger proof of this than that the Son of God should become a partner with us of human nature?* Thirdly, with regard to *charity*, which is greatly enkindled by this; hence Augustine says (*De Catech. Rudit.* iv.): *What greater cause is there of the Lord’s coming than to show God’s love for us?* And he afterwards adds: *If we have been slow to love, at least let us hasten to love in return.*²

Alright, so pause there. Basically what Thomas (following Augustine) is saying is, is that God could have simply declared us all to be forgiven, like a judge might say “not guilty” and remit the punishment of someone... or forgiven. You’re forgiven; you’re not going to be punished for your sin.

But God doesn’t just want to save us from Hell. He wants to unite us with Him. He wants to bring us into divine life of the blessed Trinity, which is a relationship of

² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III, q. 1, art. 2

love. And so it's fitting, Thomas said, that God would come to us in the Incarnation and become fully human in order to show us the proof of His love for us, that He loved us so much that He became one of us in order to lead us and journey with us back to the life of God, back to the mystery of the Trinity, back to the Father and to the love from which we fell.

So, the Incarnation, Thomas is saying, should move us to love God in return, out of gratitude for the love that He showed us. And that's really what salvation is all about. It's not about not going to Hell. It's about loving God, so the Incarnation is a motive for humanity to love God in return — a God who loved us so much that He emptied Himself of His divine glory and became fully human... assumed our humanity in order to redeem it and then to bring it back to God in the Passion, death, Resurrection, and Ascension.

Which leads us to the second quote from St. Thomas. He says the same thing about the Passion. So, did Jesus *have* to die on the cross in order to save the world? No, not absolutely speaking. God could have just saved the world. He could have just declared us forgiven. But listen to what Thomas says:

It seems that there was some other more suitable way of delivering the human race besides Christ's Passion...

And then he gives a few objections and suggestions people have made over the years.

...since God could have liberated mankind solely by His Divine will...

And that's true. We don't often think about it, but it's true. In His omnipotence — or as John says earlier in his letter — God knows everything. He can do everything. His omniscience, His omnipotence — He could have just, by His divine will, declared us saved. However, St. Augustine says, and Thomas continues:

There was no other more suitable way of healing our misery than by the Passion of Christ... In the first place, man knows thereby how much God

loves him, and is thereby stirred to love Him in return, and herein lies the perfection of human salvation; hence the Apostle says (Rom. 5:8): God commendeth His charity towards us; for when as yet we were sinners ... Christ died for us... It was accordingly more fitting that we should be delivered by Christ's Passion than simply by God's good-will.³

That's Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, part 3, question 46, article 3. And the first quote on the Incarnation was part 3, question 1, article 2.

Alright, this is really, really powerful. This is why people — I'm firmly convinced. This is why Ash Wednesday is the most popular day of the year. Priest friends of mine have noted this. Everybody thinks Christmas and Easter — those are the two most popular days when the Church is most full. No, it's actually Ash Wednesday. It's the beginning of Lent.

And I think, for what it's worth, that one of the reasons Lent is a profound season, even for disaffected Catholics — Catholics who don't go to church very much — they feel that pull to return to the season where we prepare for the Crucifixion, because there is something about the cross, rightly understood, that is the clearest example of God's love for humanity... that He not only becomes one of us but that He bears the excruciating pain, the suffering, the torture, the trial, and the death (fully human death) on the cross out of love for us and because He wills the good of the salvation of the human race.

So why do people love Christmas? It's the same thing. If the story of Christmas is true, then it means that God loves the whole human race with an infinite love that manifested itself in Him becoming a little baby. And then if the mystery of the cross and Easter is true, then it means that that same God was willing to lay down His life for His friends.

Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. (John 15:13)

³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III, q. 46, art. 3

And that's how He counts us, even while we were yet sinners, Paul said. Long before we loved Him, He loved us from all eternity, from the foundation of the world.

So two powerful examples — the supreme examples, the ones that anchor the parts of the Creed too (the Apostles' Creed) — are the mystery of the Incarnation and the mystery of the Passion, because they're supreme examples in time and space of the mystery of God's love for humanity. That's what John means when he says:

In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world...

This is why people love John 3:16:

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

Alright, so that's the mystery of the Incarnation and the Passion. One last mystery though, just to keep it simple... and it's the mystery of the Trinity itself. Now St. Augustine, in his famous *Homilies on 1 John* — which I can't recommend highly enough, beautiful set of homilies on 1 John — said this about this verse, God is love:

If nothing were said in praise of love in all the pages of this epistle, if nothing at all were said in the other pages of the scriptures, and this were the one and only thing that we heard from the voice of the Spirit of God, that *God is love*, we wouldn't have to look for anything else.⁴

You can hear Augustine waxing eloquent there. He said this verse is the heart of the Scriptures. If all we had was this one verse, *deus caritas est*, we wouldn't have to look for anything else. It's the heart of the mystery, because it doesn't just tell us what God has done. It tells us *who* God is. God is love.

⁴ Augustine, *Homilies on 1 John* 7:4 (trans. Boniface Ramsey)

And you might think, “Well, what does that mean?” The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains it in a beautiful section on the love of God that I would highly recommend if you’re praying with this, meditating on this. It’s paragraph 218-221, a little section on God is love. And I’ll just read one of the paragraphs, the last one. It’s on our verse for today, and it says in paragraph 221:

But St. John goes even further when he affirms that “God is love”...

1 John chapter 4, verse 8 and 16. What does it mean?

*God’s very being is love. By sending his only Son and the Spirit of Love in the fullness of time, God has revealed his innermost secret: God himself is an eternal exchange of love, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and he has destined us to share in that exchange.*⁵

That’s the *Catechism*. If you think the *Catechism* is boring and dry, you just told me you haven’t read the *Catechism*.

Okay, so in 221, what the *Catechism* is saying here is that when St. John says “God is love,” he’s making a metaphysical statement — in other words, a statement about the very being of God. His very being is love. What does that mean? It means that by sending the Son and the Spirit — the mission of the Son in the Incarnation, the mission of the Spirit in the Church at Pentecost — God has revealed the innermost secret.

Now think about that. There are a lot of secrets of God. There are a lot of mysteries of God, so what’s the deepest secret? What’s the most profound secret? What’s the most innermost secret of God? It’s that God Himself *is* an eternal exchange of love — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It’s the mystery of the Trinity, that the Father loves the Son eternally, the Son loves the Father eternally, and that exchange of love *is* the third person of the Holy Spirit. He is the charity of the Father and the Son, and that eternal exchange of love between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit *is* salvation. It *is* our destiny. It’s what we were created for. He has destined us

⁵ *Catechism of Catholic Church*, par 221

(humanity, human beings) to share in that exchange — not just for a year, not just for two years, not just for a thousand years, but for *all* eternity.

This is what salvation is. This is what Heaven is. This is what the Resurrection is all about. This is what the Ascension is. It's all about the entry of God's creatures into the blessed life of the Most Holy Trinity. And that's what John means — that's what John reveals to us — in this tiny, little, simple letter when he says those words: *ho theos agapē estin. Deus caritas est.* God is love.