

The Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost

November 4, 2018

Solemn Mass

By the Reverend James Ross Smith

Year B, Proper 26: Deuteronomy 6:1–9; Psalm 119:1–8; Hebrews 7:23–28; Mark 12:28–34

Nearly fifty years ago, in 1970, the film *Lovers and Other Strangers* did pretty well at the box office. It had a great cast and was nominated for three Academy Awards. A song in the film, “For All We Know,” won the Oscar that year. It’s a song that some folks of a certain age might remember.

The movie was very much of its time. It takes place here in New York as an Italian-American family and a WASPy family gather here in the city for the wedding of their children. Over the course of a few days, it is revealed that a number of the members of these two families are in crisis, and the issue is the meaning of love and commitment. The groom declares that the upcoming marriage ceremony would be hypocritical since he and his fiancée have already been living together for some time; one of the groom’s older brothers, a Roman Catholic priest, who’s supposed to officiate at the wedding, has decided to leave the priesthood; another brother’s marriage is falling apart

because the couple feel that the passion that brought them together has begun to wane. At one point, the wife tells her traditional Italian-American father-in-law that she's not sure she loves her husband any longer. She struggles to explain this, and the best she can do is this, "His hair stopped smelling like raisins."

The father, played by Richard Castellano, tells his equally bewildered wife, played by Bea Arthur, about this and it is there that you see the clash of two different cultures, two different eras, two different ways of experiencing love and commitment. For the parents, love is not just a feeling, an emotion. It is commitment, patience, endurance, and a set of promises that are enacted in the world. Love is holding down a job to support the kids. It is cooking and cleaning and taking care of the children when they are sick. It is raising them up "right." It's also taking care of one's own parents when they grow older and their health begins to fail. All that and more is love. Love is not something that dissolves and blows away like the morning mist. Love involves actions more than it does words. It does not insist on supposedly "authentic" feelings at every stage of one's life. It can endure change, aging, the waning of passion. It can

survive even when your husband’s hair “stops smelling like raisins.”

The love of God that we hear about in Deuteronomy and in Mark’s gospel is much more like the love of those bewildered parents than it is the love proclaimed by their romantically inclined children: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD; and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deuteronomy 6:4–5) Here, in Deuteronomy, the commandment begins with a recognition of who God is. God is one. God is God. God alone is God. All other gods are no gods at all.¹ Once this is acknowledged, then Israel is asked to enter into a relationship with God that is a covenantal relationship, a relationship that involves commitments and promises of mutual care and concern. But this care is not just a feeling. It is enacted through obedience and service. However, and this is important, this is not a master-slave relationship. It is more like a good parent-child relationship. Love exists. Feelings are involved. But acts of love are more

¹ My understanding of the passage from Deuteronomy has been shaped by Jon Levenson, *The Love of God Divine Gift, Human Gratitude, and Mutual Faithfulness in Judaism*, Library of Jewish Ideas, Princeton University Press, 2015.

important than are declarations of undying love. Love is more than just words. Love lived out every day is more important than the occasional ritual. Valentine's Day and a dozen roses are less important than commitment and consistency. That's why this love, this commitment, is to be taught to one's children and kept before one's eyes all the time. And that's why the love of God involves love of neighbor as well, as Jesus knows. For Israel, for Jesus, saying that you love God and sealing that declaration with a religious ceremony like sacrifice is not enough: loving God entails doing what God commands, which means loving the neighbor and the stranger. A corrupt and hard-hearted community that says all the right things, but does not act generously and compassionately is not the obedient community that the Lord demands.

Once we begin to enter into the world described in these ancient biblical texts, we can begin to question our assumptions about love that are, for some of us, shaped by romance novels and the movies. We begin to see that love is not just for the young. Love is not limited to the erotic. Love happens in some unexpected ways: we read about now-retired Supreme Court justice, Sandra Day O'Connor, whose husband

has dementia and is in a retirement home.² He's mostly forgotten the nature of his relationship with Justice O'Connor, and he's fallen in love with a woman who lives in his retirement community. And Justice O'Connor is happy about all that. Because she wants her husband to be happy.

We read about two soldiers at the Invictus Games in Sydney playing doubles tennis. One of them, afflicted with the fears and anxieties of PTSD, hears the sound of a helicopter and freezes. His partner stops, goes over to his friend, looks him in the eye, and talks him through those fears. These are not the stars of Wimbledon and the US Open. During these games, you can take the time to care for a distressed friend. As terrible storms hit our nation each fall, we read about men and women in Puerto Rico, Florida, Texas, and the Carolinas taking in family members, rescuing neighbors in boats, giving beloved family pets shelter till the waters recede.

All this is more like the love of Deuteronomy and Jesus than our modern romantic ideas about love. And there is freedom in that: we do not need to wait till "it

² See Liptak, Adam, "Battling Dementia, Sandra Day O'Connor Leaves Public Life with Plea for Bipartisanship," *New York Times*, October 23, 2018.

feels right” in order to act. We don’t need to be a certain kind of person in order to love. All of us can love in this way: using the gifts God has given us to make a difference, to make something happen, whether it’s big or small, in the world we live in. And then stick with it, even on the hard days. Then, sometimes, a miracle happen: love follows love that has been enacted. We love God and neighbor and in so doing we discover what real love feels like.

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