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St. Mary the Virgin, NYC
15 May 2022

YEAR C, EASTER 5, SUNDAY: SOLEMN MASS
ACTS 13:44–52
PSALM 145:1–9
REVELATION 19:1–10*
JOHN 13:31–35

This afternoon, after Mass, our AIDS Walk team will gather and walk together in Central Park. We've raised over fifty thousand dollars so far this year! I say "so far," because our team will continue to raise money through June 10th. The money goes primarily towards the GMHC, the nation's leading provider of HIV/AIDS care, prevention services, and advocacy. They help and serve nearly 13,000 people here in the city.¹

But, the question I have for us, given today's Gospel, is how should we understand our work here? Or, our Neighbors in Need program? Sure, I know we are helping where there's need and making a difference in our community. But, do the implications go even deeper?

To begin to look at it through a theological lens, we could certainly say that we're following Jesus' command to love our neighbors as ourselves. This is something Jesus talks about in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.² In fact, the idea of loving one's neighbor as oneself dates to Leviticus in the Old Testament.³ But, in our passage from John today, Jesus says to his disciples that he is giving them a *new* commandment that they should love one another.

So, what exactly is so *new* about what we heard today?

To get a handle on what's new, let's take a step back and look at some of the other things John wrote about love. That is, love from God's point of view.

Earlier in the text, there's the well-known verse:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."⁴

Many often focus on the Cross here in John 3:16, and rightly so, but the verses just prior speak of the Son of Man descending from heaven and the verse after talks about God sending his Son into the world.⁵ In other words, the incarnation, the transformative act of God entering into this world and taking on flesh, is going to be central for our understanding of God's love.

¹ <https://ny.aidswalk.net/Static/whobenefits>

² Mark 12:31, Matthew 22:39, Luke, 10:27.

³ Leviticus 19:18.

⁴ John 3:16.

⁵ John 3:13 and 3:17.

Our passage also, in some ways, is a highly condensed “CliffsNotes” version of a long discourse by Jesus that follows. So, looking ahead can also help us to untangle today’s brief but dense lesson.

At one point, in conversation with the Father, Jesus will say:

“Righteous Father... I made your name known... and will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them and I in them.”⁶

In other words, the relationship between the Father and the Son, based in love, extends to us and to our relationship with Jesus. It even goes as far as Jesus being within us. So, it’s no coincidence that our passage opened with Jesus talking about the relationship between the Father and the Son: how they’re glorifying each other. This new commandment to love one is a love that parallels the relationship between the Father and the Son.

The implications of the incarnation obligate us to enter into relationship with one another in a way that, while it isn’t completely identical, in some mysterious way does resemble the relationship between the Father and the Son.

It’s also one way of looking at the rather striking statement by St. Athanasius that God “was made man that we might be made God.”⁷ Of course, to be clear, we don’t ever become God. But, God entering into this world shows us our calling to do god-like things and in the process become more god-like ourselves.

St. Catherine of Siena is somebody who understood how the incarnation blurs a bit the lines between where creator ends and creation begins. And, she also knew how to put this into action. Catherine, who lived in the 14th century, was many things: a reformer, a writer, a contemplative, and a mystic. And, if there is one theme that comes up, over and over again, in her writings, it would be God’s love for creation.⁸

It is important to point out that as a third-order Dominican, she wasn’t the type of contemplative that lived in isolation as a hermit or closed away somewhere in a convent.

That wouldn’t have worked for her. In fact, she felt that her mystical encounters with the Lord obligated her to be out in the world, interacting with others.

God’s love was a central theme for Catherine and, after receiving Christ’s heart in a vision, this was only solidified. She was overwhelmed by God’s love and, at times, even describes God as being madly in love with creation.⁹

Catherine was so overwhelmed by God’s love that she felt in debt. How could a finite human being reciprocate love from God who is infinite?

⁶ John 17:25-26.

⁷ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 54.3.

⁸ Mary T O’Driscoll, “St. Catherine of Siena: Life and Spirituality,” *Angelicum*, Vol. 57, No. 3 (1980), 305-323.

⁹ Catherine of Siena, *Dialogue*, 167.

She once was inspired to write the following. It's from her famous *Dialogue*, in which she is in conversation with God. Here, God is speaking:

“You cannot give me the love which I require of you; and, therefore, I have set you in the midst of others in order that you may do to them, what you cannot do to me, that is, love them freely and without reserve, and without expecting any return”.¹⁰

Catherine saw that the love of others was the way God intends for us to reciprocate God's love. And, this was also the reason that she needed to be out there in the world. She needed to help the poor and those in need. This is how she was able to love God. Of course, it also happens to follow Jesus' new commandment.

On the one hand, there wasn't much new in Jesus' call for us to love one another. That wisdom had been around for quite some time in the Hebrew Scriptures.

On the other hand, the world was transformed in such a way by the incarnation, God taking on flesh, that Jesus can now command us to be in relationship with God, as the Son is with the Father, through the love of one another. And this, my friends, is new!

✠ In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

¹⁰ Catherine of Siena, *Dialogue*, 64.