

Tenth Sunday after Trinity
August 9, 2015
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
John 6:41-51

Our Epistle this morning very helpfully gives us the definition of love. It's a sentence I regularly repeat to you just before the offertory at Mass on Sunday: "Walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." The love St. Paul speaks of here is agape, the highest form of love, love that empties oneself for the good of another, undertaken with no expectation of receiving anything in return.

We generally associate this love with our Lord's Passion, wherein Jesus suffered terribly at the hands of the very sinners He desired to save. As He poured Himself out, Jesus prayed for the men killing Him, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." This love, then, is the model we are to imitate, to pour ourselves out, not just for those close to us, but also for those who literally desire to kill us. Our love for our neighbor must be so profound that it resembles the Lord's betrayal, abandonment, mockery, torture, and death.

The love that is defined and described in Ephesians 5 is so difficult and demanding, but at the same time is also so beautiful. For this reason I study this chapter of the Bible with every couple who undertakes pre-marital counseling with me. Ephesians, chapter 5 was also formerly read at every Catholic wedding before the revision of the lectionary that began around 1970. In other words, the love to which we are called finds its expression and closest approximation in the sacrament of Holy Matrimony.

Marriage, then, points to how this love is usually lived out. While we can imagine suffering a martyr's death at the hands of those who hate the Church, as so many of our Catholic brothers and sisters are suffering right now in Syria and Iraq, agape love is not limited to the province of those who shed their blood for the Faith. Martyrs have always been a minority among the vast Catholic faithful, so we must consider of what agape consists for the multitude of those who never receive the palm of martyrdom.

We find the answer in today's Gospel, wherein Jesus says plainly, "I am the bread which came down from heaven," and again, "I am the living bread which came down from heaven." The sacrifice that Jesus made before His Passion, therefore, is the Incarnation, to take on the flesh of His human creation and live amongst those who wish Him harm, to live amongst those who would eventually betray, abandon, mock, torture, and kill Him. Martyrdom, we see, is the culmination, the culminating sacrifice, of a life lived sacrificially. The love that leads one to shed his blood for his neighbor is preceded by a love that moves one to live with and among the selfish and the ungrateful.

Marriage is by definition to share everything with another, including, of course, one's own home. So we see how marriage points to an incarnational manner of sacrifice. We may well die for our spouse, but again we know that the vast majority of married couples sacrifice themselves in the day-to-day routines of living with another person who is ungrateful and selfish. If a man must lay down his life for his wife, or vice versa, he has already poured himself out for her by living with and sacrificing for her on a daily basis. Those who do not or will not do this cannot be expected to put their lives on the line in time of trial, death comes knocking. The love of the incarnation is always a precursor to the love of the cross.

How do we live out this incarnational love apart from our marriages? How do we imitate the love of Jesus, who placed Himself in the midst of the snarky and condescending, people who asked questions like, “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?”, people who murmured behind His back, refused to believe what He said, and then walked away from Him when they didn’t like what they heard? Such love is hard to practice when we have pledged ourselves to our beloved spouse. And yet we are all called to love this way amongst those with whom we live.

We begin to be like Jesus to others by coming to church. Jesus said in today’s Gospel, “Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me.” Faith draws them here, to Jesus present in the Blessed Sacrament. At Mass we encounter those of the household of faith, those who acknowledge that God exists and that we are accountable to Him, that He became man, dwelt among us, and died and rose for our salvation. However much difficulty our fellow believers may have in actually living according to this faith, they share it. Mass is an introduction to the demands of the cross, for here we love those who are easiest to love—those who, while failing, are actually making an attempt. At Mass we see that God loves a whole bunch of other people, and they love Him, too. It isn’t just Jesus and me.

If the Mass forces us to acknowledge that we have neighbors, others who are also drawn to the Lord of life, Catholic churches in America don’t always communicate the second group of people we are called to love unconditionally, those who don’t share the faith. That’s because too many Catholic churches are not located where people actually live, that is to say, in a neighborhood. When access to the highway and ample parking are two principal requirements for church construction, the understanding that churches are missionary centers is lost. People are able to come and go without ever seeing the faces of the other people we are called to serve. I didn’t want that for you, so we bought a church in a place where we are regularly confronted by those God wants us to love.

This second group is a bigger challenge because they don’t come to Mass; they don’t necessarily share our assumptions about the reality of God; they therefore aren’t even trying to love God, and thus their lives are even more disordered than ours are. How can we convince them that we love them if we avoid setting foot where they live? Will these neighbors believe we’d lay down our very lives for them if we won’t spend ample time in their midst? They might not come to church, but they aren’t stupid. They know that the greatest sacrifice – death - isn’t going to happen unless the greater one – living with them - happens first. To die for them, we must love them. To love them, we must know them. To know them, we must spend time with them. Always the cross comes after the incarnation. This church isn’t just a clubhouse for a love feast. It’s a missionary outpost in a valley of tears.

I want you to invite your friends to come to Mass here in Providence. But, please, also tell them where they’re going, so they’ll know what’s expected of them if they decide to stay.