

Easter 5/C  
*I'll Love You Forever*  
Acts 11:1-18; Psalm 148; Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35  
15 May 2022

There is a children's book that Deb and I first read to our children and have long enjoyed. In fact, we have given several copies to friends and neighbors as gifts for baby showers and to welcome newborns. You too may know it. It is titled *Love You Forever*, and it begins with a mother holding her new baby. She rocks him and sings a lullaby:

I'll love you forever,  
I'll like you for always,  
As long as I'm living,  
My baby you'll be.

As the years go by, of course, the baby grows. He becomes a toddler, and gets into everything; and his mother says: This kid is driving me CRAZY! But at night she still sings him their special song:

I'll love you forever,  
I'll like you for always,  
As long as I'm living,  
My baby you'll be.

The baby grows some more; he is nine years old, never wants to take a bath, and says bad words when his grandma visits. His mother feels like selling him to the Zoo. But still, at night, she sings their song:

I'll love you forever,  
I'll like you for always,  
As long as I'm living,  
My baby you'll be.

The boy becomes a teenager, and, of course, that's the worst! He has strange friends and he wears strange clothes, and he listens to strange music. His mother feels like she lives in a Zoo! But guess what? At night, when he is safely asleep, she still sings to him:

I'll love you forever.  
I'll like you for always,  
As long as I'm living,  
My baby you'll be.

Finally, the boy is all grown up and moves into his own house. Even once the boy is grown, sometimes, on dark nights, the mother drives across town to his house, creeps into his house, and sings – well, you know what she sings:

I'll love you forever,  
I'll like you for always,  
As long as I'm living,  
My baby you'll be.

At last, the mother is old and sick. She sings to her boy, but she isn't able to finish the song. Her son, however, has learned his lesson well. He knows what to do. Holding his mother close, he rocks her in his arms, and now sings their special song to her:

I'll love you forever,  
I'll like you for always,  
As long as I'm living,  
My Mommy you'll be.

And when he returns home that night, he stands for a long time at the top of the stairs. Then, going into the room where his own newborn baby daughter is sleeping, he takes her in his arms and sings:

I'll love you forever,  
I'll like you for always,  
As long as I'm living,  
My baby you'll be.

And we can see the cycle of love between parent and child beginning all over again.

Nice story, you may be thinking, but just what does this have to do with God and Jesus and the Church? Well, let's see . . .

Today's Gospel reading comes from the chapters of St. John's Gospel known as "The Last Discourse." It takes place during the Last Supper, Jesus' final meal with the disciples on the night before Jesus gave up his life on the hard wood of the cross. In these chapters, Jesus has urgent messages for his Apostles, for the Church that would follow, down to us all these centuries later; things that he needs to tell us before he goes away. "I am with you only a little longer," he says, and "you will look for me, "but where I am going you cannot come." And because the Apostles could not at that time follow where he was going, he gives them a new commandment: that they should love one another.

Now just what makes this a new commandment? It is certainly not the first time in Holy Scripture that we are told to love one another. But now, we are told to love, not just with natural, human love, not just because it's the nice thing to do, but to love one another as a sign of the divine love of God. And this commandment is so important, Jesus says, that it is to be the hallmark, the very essence, of being a Christian: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Jesus' commandment is that we must love one another. And he gives this commandment because he is going away, because we will look for him but cannot follow where he is going. We may not follow, but Christ is not lost to us, for we will find him in the love that we share. We will find him whenever the love of our brothers and sisters becomes a sign of God's love for us.

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another."

With these eleven words, Jesus turns the world order upside-down - in first-century Palestine and here, today.

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another."

Jesus tells us that everyone will know we are his disciples if we have love for one another. And it sounds quite simple, doesn't it? Just love.

Love your neighbor. Love yourself. Love your enemy. Love your spouse. Love your children. Love your friend. Love your coworker, your mailman, your pharmacist. Love the stranger on the street. Love everybody. Just love . . .

Sounds easy, but we all know it isn't. Some is definitely harder than other parts, right? Like, "Love your enemy." Or the busybody next door neighbor. But the overall gist is this simple to grasp: love - that's something we can affirm. Love is the answer.

As St. Paul tells us, love "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things". If love can do all that, it really is the answer. So, if love is the answer, what is the question?

Perhaps it is just this: Why should we love? Maybe that's the ultimate question: Why?

And the answer is as simple as this: Because we were loved first. Our loving then becomes not an initiative, but a simple response to something already done for us.

We are to love, simply because God loved us first.

In the magnificent gift of Creation, God first loves us. And in the gift of his Son, Jesus, God loves us. In the death and resurrection of Christ, God loves us completely and unconditionally.

And accompanying all these acts of divine love, there is a lullaby, sung by God to each of us, his beloved children:

I'll love you forever,  
I'll like you for always,  
As long as I'm living,  
My child you'll be.

So, having first received this great gift of God's divine love, let us now respond with love – for the world, for one another, for ourselves - for God, who loves us forever and always.

Amen.