

Date: May 1, 2005

SUNDAY: Easter 6

SERMON: To Love Is To Know

Text(s): John 14:15-21

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We just got our brochure about the shows that the Maine State Music Theater is going to be performing this summer. I imagine many of you did, too. So now we have to figure out which ones we'll be around to see and get our tickets ordered.

The problem with musical theater is that it's not always the songs of your favorite shows that stick in your mind. Sometimes it is, but sometimes it's the ones from shows you really didn't care for that you remember. For instance, I never liked "Bye Bye Birdie" all that much, when it first came out, having never been much of an Elvis fan. Yet I've sat through it numerous times because it's regularly performed in high school dramas that I've dutifully attended over the years. There's a song from that show that has embedded itself in my memory even though I don't particularly like it, either for its musical qualities or for the thought it expresses. It's the one that the group of teenage girls sing about their idol, the rock and roll singer Conrad Birdie, who, of course, is modeled on the real-life Elvis Presley. It goes "To know, know, know him is to love, love, love him." You remember that one?

The song asserts that knowing someone is the precondition for loving them. How can we love someone without knowing them? How can we love someone without knowing whether they're good or bad, well-mannered or boorish, gentle or abrasive? In our culture, engagement or living together precedes marriage because we believe that mature love and commitment grow as our knowledge of the beloved increases. (Although in many cultures where marriages are arranged, the sequence is reversed: first marriage, then the growth of love—at least that's the way it's supposed to happen in those cultures. And sometimes it does.)

In that expression, "to know is to love," knowledge is equated with first-hand experience. We know a person when we experience relationship with that person at first-hand. We know them when we observe what they do, how they behave, what they say. Knowledge is the fruit of experience, and only after we know can we love.

Yet in our gospel lesson, St. John reverses the equation. For John, love does not grow out of knowledge; rather love leads to knowledge. For John, the equation is not "to know is to love," but "to love is to know."

The gospel of John was written to address a very deeply felt need within the church late in the first century. None of the audience for whom it was intended would have had any contact with Jesus during his lifetime. Some of them would not even have been born yet. They were one or two generations removed from Jesus and his disciples. Most scholars believe that this gospel was written to encourage those who were embroiled in the increasingly bitter family feud that eventually resulted in the separation of Christians from their Jewish roots. In such a painful conflict which often set members of the same family or the same synagogue against each other, it's natural that some should begin to question whether their allegiance to Jesus as the Messiah was well placed? After all, they had not seen Jesus, they had not been around when those first disciples started proclaiming that God had raised Jesus from the dead. All they had was second-hand or third-hand testimony. Was the story true? How could they know they weren't following some fantasy? We hear echoes of that question in several places. In the question of Thomas that we heard last week, in the verses just before our text today, "*Lord, we do not know where you are going, so how can we know the way?*" or the question of Philip, "*Lord, show us the Father and we will be satisfied,*" and above all, perhaps, in the story of Doubting Thomas which was our lesson a few weeks ago. In that story, we heard Jesus saying "*Blessed are all those who have not seen and yet have believed.*"

Near the end of the gospel, John says explicitly that he is writing in order that these second or third-generation Christians may believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and that believing, they may have life in his name. That's about as clear a statement of an author's purpose as we could ask for. John, whoever he was, wrote this gospel to answer that deeply felt question, "How can we know that our faith is firmly grounded? How can we know that Jesus is who we've been told he is? What does it mean to give our allegiance to him? How can we know him?"

Aren't those the questions that all of us ask at some point too? After all, we're in the same position as the Christians for whom this gospel was written. None of us were around to see Jesus, to hear his teachings, to witness his healings, to have the first-hand experience of him in order to make our own judgment about who he was. We're all disciples at third or fourth-hand, aren't we?

John's answer to those questions is profound, and it is an answer that speaks to every generation of Christians after the first. Not all of us feel those questions deeply all the time. Some of us may not even have asked them at all. But sooner or later, these questions about the basis of our faith arise. They usually arise during times of testing or adversity. When times are tough, we begin to ask deeper questions than we do when life is easy and the sun is shining. When life tumbles in on us, we want to know whether our faith in God has a firm foundation. We not only want to know; we need to know.

So John wrote in order that people like us may know that our faith is firmly grounded. But his answer is not necessarily what we might expect. It is an answer that challenges a lot of our assumptions about how we know someone or something.

Eight times in this short passage, the word "love" appears, and four of those times, love is equated with obedience. "*If you love me, you*

will obey my commands," Jesus says. "*They who receive my commandments and obey them, are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them, and will reveal myself to them. . . . Those who love me will obey my words; then my Father will love them and we will come to them and make our home with them. . . . On that day you will know that I am in the Father, and the Father in me, and I in you.*"

Do you see how he makes a connection between knowledge and obedience and between obedience and love? He doesn't define love as an emotion that we feel, but as something we do. Love is obeying the commands of Christ. And what are Christ's commands? A few paragraphs further on, we hear Jesus saying, "*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another as I have loved you. By this will all know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.*"

That's the command of Christ which we are called to obey, and this obedience then results in knowledge, first-hand knowledge of God. Our faith does not rest on the basis of what someone else tells us, even if that someone else is an apostle. On the basis of the testimony of the apostles, testimony which is handed down through our gospels, we ourselves act, we ourselves choose to obey the words of Christ; we choose to act lovingly toward others. And in that act of obedience the mystery of Christ's living presence, the mystery of the relationship of Christ and God and us is communicated to us personally by the Advocate whom Jesus spoke of, the Holy Spirit, so that we know God experientially. Love for Christ, expressed in obedience to his command to love one another, leads to knowledge, not the other way round.

Thomas Merton has an illuminating passage in his essay on "The Power and Meaning of Love" (from *Disputed Questions*) which speaks to this link between love and knowledge.

Our greatest dignity, our most essential and peculiar power, the most intimate secret of our humanity is our capacity to love. This power in the depths of the human soul stamps us in the image and likeness of God. . . This vocation to be children of God means that we must learn to love as God loves. . . Love then, is not only our own salvation and the key to the meaning of our own existence, but is also the key to the meaning of the entire creation of God.

Love is the key to meaning, to understanding, to knowledge. And love, in this instance, means obedience to the words of Christ. To obey is to love; to love is to know. That's the order of our experience of God's reality. That is the pattern whereby we come into what John Wesley called "the assurance of salvation."

Why is it, then, that we aren't more confident in our knowledge of God? Why is it that we have so many questions about whether God is real or whether our faith is well-placed?

Anthony Bloom was the Metropolitan of the Russian Orthodox Church in Exile, during the Soviet era. In his little book, *Beginning to Pray*, which has become a spiritual classic, he makes the point that we often feel that God is absent from our world and from our lives. We wonder how we can be sure that God is real. We wonder how we can know whether God really loves us. We feel God's presence infrequently, and because we cannot sense God's presence, we conclude that God is absent or indifferent.

But in fact, Metropolitan Anthony says, it's not God who is absent to us; we are the ones who are absent to God. We do not make ourselves present to God because we don't obey God's will, even when it is clear. We allow the world around us to set our agendas and our priorities. We crowd God out of our lives because we are too busy. We let our jobs take over control of our time, we buy houses and cars, change jobs, choose careers, choose mates, pick universities for our children, and we frequently

do these things without ever giving a thought to whether these are what Christ is calling us to do, or how they relate to Christ's command to love him by loving others. We let the politicians and the pundits tell us what we should think, what we should believe, identify which issues we should get excited about and which side of those issues we should be on, rather than seeking the mind of Christ as we discern it in the scriptures or through our community of faith. We evade intimacy with God all along the way because we evade intimacy with one another, even in church. So when the crisis comes, and we suddenly cry out to God to be present with us and help us, we cannot feel that presence. We cannot experience it, because we've been obeying our own words or the words of our culture or the words of the idols we prefer to the true God rather than the words of Christ. We've been loving ourselves rather than loving others and so God seems absent to us just when we need him most.

When I was in college I had the privilege of hearing Dr. E. Stanley Jones speak. Stanley Jones was then in his 80's and had been a long-time missionary statesman for the kingdom of God. He spent most of his adult life in India, where he had a unique ministry among upper-caste Hindus, and did a great deal to get those aristocratic leaders of newly independent India to begin to think about their responsibilities toward the lower castes, particularly those known as the Untouchables. In the talk that he gave us, he revealed the secret of his productive and fruitful life as an ambassador for Christ. He said that for many, many years he had formed the habit of letting the first thought in his mind as he awoke to consciousness each morning be a question, "Lord, what do you want me to be and do today?" The long habit of asking that question before he ever got out of bed in the morning, over the years had formed him into a person whose primary orientation was toward God. It was a way of making himself present to God. It's hardly surprising then, that he was often able to sense an

answer to that question. He wasn't crazy; he didn't hear voices. But he could understand what God wanted of him. He was just following the order John lays down; to love is to obey; to obey is to know. And then he made it a point of honor to try, to the best of his ability, to follow through with whatever it was he discerned in that intimate encounter. As a result of this discipline of obedience to the commands of Christ, he was able to pack into his nearly ninety years of life, a great harvest of good. He helped establish Lucknow Medical College in north India, still one of India's premier medical schools, he campaigned for medical care and literacy for poor rural Indian villagers, he traveled the globe advocating for justice for the poor, he was asked by President Roosevelt to be an intermediary in negotiations with the Japanese during World War II, he wrote dozens of books on the Christian life, many of which are still widely read and continue to bless those who read them, he was repeatedly asked, (and just as repeatedly he refused) to become a bishop of his church. He was a man who learned the secret that personal knowledge of God grows out of loving obedience to God.

That same equation still works. If we want to know God's power and presence in our lives, we have to do what Jesus said. We have to obey his command to love others. Understanding Christ's commandment is easy; obeying it is the hard part, because we really prefer to do our own will rather than God's. We really prefer to serve our own needs rather than those of our neighbors. We really prefer to be served rather than to serve.

And yet, if we will take the risks of loving others, even when they don't love us back or even when they are unlovable, we will discover the key to the meaning, not only of our own lives, but to the very mystery of the triune God. We will know, really and truly know, at first-hand, that Christ is risen, and that therefore, our feet are planted on the solid rock, and that there is hope for our lost and broken world.