

For the Love of God
3rd Sunday of Advent - Year A - 12/15/2019
Psalm Reading: 146:5-10
1st Reading: Matt. 11:2-11, 2nd: Isaiah 35:1-10

In our reading for today from the Romans, Paul addresses his letter to all in Rome “who are loved by God and called to be his holy people: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.” O, to be loved by God! Are we like these Romans whom Paul is addressing, loved by God?

Probably the most popular verse in the entire Bible is John 3:16. In the King James version it reads: “For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” This is a favored verse for a very good reason. It expresses the most fundamental aspect of who God is. God is all about love. And God is not so limited that love is only for a select few. It is not only for those who are perfect, without blemish, but for all people, all things even, for the universe as well...because it would be impossible to think that God limits love to this “third rock from the sun” as it has been called.

In the New Testament we find love all over the place. But what we don't realize when we read the Bible is that those who wrote in the original Greek had many words for different kinds of love. I have seen authors distinguish as many as eight different Greek words for love.¹

The Greeks had “*eros*” for erotic love.
“*Philia*” for affectionate love.

1 <https://lonerwolf.com/different-types-of-love/>

“Storge” for familiar love.

“Ludus” for playful love, what we might call “puppy love”.

“Mania” which is more like an obsession.

“Pragma” is an enduring love.

“Philautia”, that is self-love.

Finally there is *“agape”* meaning selfless love.

We, Americans, inherited a degree of phlegmaticism, or stiff-upper-lipism or perhaps just a language from our friends across the pond in England. Maybe that is why we have precisely one whole word for love. Yes, it is a flexible word, but it is not always very concise. For example if someone tells you that they really love a movie, you don't suppose that they intend on wedding themselves to a film, at least not until they tell you that they have seen it twenty or thirty times. So we Americans, we Michiganders, we Alpenaites, when we talk of love we must rely almost totally on context. The word love becomes a blunt instrument. So it makes us wonder what it really means when we say that God IS love!

Julian of Norwich was a Christian mystic who lived as a recluse at a church in Norwich England in the 1300s. By a recluse I mean she lived in a small chamber of a church (now called St. Julians). The chamber was completely walled in except for an opening about as big as a cement block, through which food and other necessities could be passed. She spent all of her time inside of this small cell worshipping and contemplating God. And, as you might imagine, she had visions. And she wrote those visions down, and they were put together

into one of the most remarkable books to come out of the Middle Ages.² It was called "Revelations of Divine Love".

For a course I took on Christian history in Seminary I was required to read this book. I admit there is some pretty amazing stuff in it. And what struck me most were some incredible insights that she had about the nature of God's love.

One of the things Julian said was "My, how busy we become when we lose sight of how God loves us."³ And I have had reason to contemplate this lately. Christmas this season has seemed almost overwhelming. And I think it can get that way for all of us. We have all of those cards to write, stuff to cook, services to go to, presents to buy, decorations to put up, people to see...and we do it all because...well because we feel we must. We have forgotten the love of God and we are concentrating on the busy-ness of life. The perfunctory things we must do. Sometimes, we just need to stop and contemplate God's love for us, because that is truly what this Christmas/Advent season is all about.

So, how do we go about this contemplation. Julian had some insights there as well. She wrote, "Truth sees God, and wisdom contemplates God, and from these two comes a third, a holy and wonderful delight in God, who is love."

If we understand that the true Word comes from the Bible and we read it, we have the basic knowledge we need, the basic nuggets of information we need to spur contemplation and this contemplation brings wisdom, because what is wisdom but coming to see what it is that God wants for us? And finally,

² <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Julian-of-Norwich>

³ <https://www.inspiringquotes.us/author/3472-julian-of-norwich> (and subsequent quotes)

from understanding and wisdom we cannot help but be uplifted, for it becomes clear that we are the object of God's love.

Julian tells us that "Everything has being through the love of God." And we know this don't we, because God made everything, the heavens and the earth...all of it. You know, God is THE Creator. Like any creator God wants to love the creation. When you make a prayer shawl, plant a garden, or raise a child, you love it, because somehow it has become part of you. That, I think, is why God loves us. We are an extension of God. This is why I talk so much in sermons and in Bible studies about how we are made in the image of God. We are in fact not only a creation of God, but God's children. And so God has boundless love for us.

"God loved us before he made us, and his love has never diminished and never shall." Yes, Julian said that, too. So, God knew what God was doing when "he knit us together in our mother's womb."⁴ God loved us then and God loves us now, in spite of all of our wandering, all of our straying, all of our failures, and yes, all of our sins.

And Julian wrote, "[The] love of God is hard and marvelous. It cannot and will not be broken because of our sins." Yes, we are all sinners, we hear that just about every Sunday when we do our confession. We hear it so much, that sometimes we forget how serious that is for us. We forget that when we look down on others that we do wrong. We forget that when we undermine others, when we eat away at their faith, when we insult them, when we take from them, when we

4 Psalm 139

do not treat them as we would be treated, that these are heinous crimes. And they are crimes precisely because God loves each and every one of us so much. God does not want any of us injured and when that injury comes from another one of God's creation, it multiplies the evil of it. But in spite of God's frustration, in spite of God's anger, God's love for us remains.

And that brings us back to what God has done for us. God sent Christ to redeem us. To conquer sin and death. God sent that little child in a manger to grow up and to take on all of the sins of humanity and then to suffer for them, so that ultimately we will not have to. And we celebrate that during the Christmas season. Further, during this Advent season, we become acutely aware that Christ will come again, and it is at this time that all sin will be washed away and there will only remain God's people in relationship with each other and in relationship with God, Christ, the Spirit, all in one.

You see Julian of Norwich did have plenty of time to think in her little cell. Her needs were met by people bringing her food and water, and taking away the left-overs through the hole in the wall. That solitude, that simplicity of life is why I sometimes think about Julian of Norwich, not always to contemplate her wisdom, but because in the heat of an active day I actually envy her situation. You know, having time just to think about the wonder that is our God; contemplating God's goodness, the sacrifice made by our Lord, thinking about the wonderful world to come where we will all meet together again and live in harmony.

But, you know, I think being shut up in a small cell about the size of our vestry, and honestly there is barely room to turn

around in there, would not even be legal nowadays. I am sure it would violate fire codes and probably penal codes as well. Besides, I think I would get antsy after an hour or two of it. I can barely sit at my desk for an hour before I have to get up for a walk-about or to pour myself another cup of green tea or coffee. I know I would not last longer than a day in a cell in the church wall because I would be anxious to be back out in the world where I could act on all those things I had been contemplating.

For me, the most important thing Julian of Norwich wrote was, "The greatest honor we can give Almighty God is to live gladly because of the knowledge of his love." And she was surely right. All of this busyness we engage in, all of the extra things we do during the Christmas and Advent season we do because we want to honor God in the form of that little baby, in the form of Christ the King. And though this season can seem hectic and gruelling at times, in the end, we do it all for the Love of God.

Please pray with me...

Loving God, we are surrounded daily by the evidence of your love for us. You give us a beautiful and vibrant city in which to live. You give us the bounty on our tables. You grant us the fellowship of each other that unites us in one Body of Christ. We thank you Lord for your unending love.

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