

Sermon for the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter, May 3, 2015  
And Celebration of the  
*Women and Girls Corporate Communion*  
Church of the Epiphany, Richmond, Virginia  
*David Hathaway Knight, Interim Rector*

*In the Name of God who is Father, Son, and Holy  
Spirit. Amen.*

*“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God... Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.”*

Sometimes, things we may have heard a long time ago can remain etched in our memory forever. I remember something that David Evans, rector of St. Paul's in Holyoke, Massachusetts, where I began my parish ministry, told me some 40 years ago when I was his assistant. He told me that most preachers have but one sermon throughout their ministry. They may use different illustrations in different settings, yet they have but one basic message that finds its way into most of their sermons. That's probably true.

Apparently it was thought to be true of one of the great bishops of our church, the late William Appleton Lawrence who served as the third bishop of the Diocese of Western Massachusetts from 1937 until 1957. He was remembered as a faithful pastor and fine preacher. But legend has it that an upstart seminarian in Cambridge said that there was only problem with Bishop Lawrence's preaching.

According to this seminarian, it was that he had only one sermon. Whenever he preached, somehow, the message centered on one theme, and it was, "God is Love." But if one only had one sermon, it could be argued that "God is Love" was not all that bad a topic.

In the first letter of John that we heard this morning, we hear with stunning brevity what God is and what God is not: Sometimes, in our insecurity, even our fear for ourselves and for those whom we love, we long for protection. We yearn for a God who can control the elements of nature, who will keep us safe on the highway, a God who will protect us from all

harm, a God who can prevent disease, a God who can stop or even prevent violence.

We live in a world of increasing moral and ethical confusion. We might yearn for a God who will somehow lay down the law with complete clarity and who will hold everyone accountable, a God who will catch the cheaters and all those immoral people, and who will reward the faithful who obey God's statutes as they perceive them to be.

We live in a culture with an insatiable hunger to be successful and to possess things. We all, of course have our wants. Some yearn for a God who will make them prosperous if they simply obey and follow a few of God's principles. Recently, I walked into a Barnes and Noble bookstore and saw a display of books by a current promoter of that concept of God. Nowhere in the Gospels, however, are we promised physical safety from harm or illness or violence, nor are we promised law that is laid down with complete clarity,

nor are we promised prosperity. In his letter we hear today, John avoids all these descriptions of God. Instead, he uses one word, one word only, to describe the nature of God. The one word is “love.” Perhaps Bishop Lawrence was not so far off after all. Indeed, not power, not law, not the promise of prosperity, but rather self-sacrificing love is what is at the heart of the truth about the nature of God. When, for example, our worst fears come true and we suffer great loss, God is love. St. Paul reminds us, “For I am persuaded,” he says, “that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come... will be able to separate us from the love of God.” Even as cities burn in the midst of unrest, God is there. This week we witnessed a mother, Toya Graham seeing her son on Television among the looters as she goes and finds him and reads him the riot act confronting him as only a mother can. That’s tough love and God is in the midst of that love. Evil things happen and yet signs of God’s love prevail in unexpected ways and places.

How do we know that God is love? We only have to look back at what God has done in the course of human history. John's message to us this morning is as clear and simple as it is powerful. It is that we know God first through the record of that community around Jesus, through those, for example, who stood at the foot of the cross and watched the suffering of outstretched love. We know that God is love through those in the community of the faithful who prepared Jesus' body for burial, seeing first hand wounds that were caused by betrayal and violence yet wounds that were met with love. We know that God is love through those in the community like Thomas who doubted only to have their doubts transformed by the presence of a love that simply will not die.

What those in the early Church would come to experience, you and I too have come to know, for God is around us at every side. If God's love was present in the lives of people then, so it continues to

be present now in the lives of each of us. That is not to say that there are times when one can apart from God, times when one does not feel God's presence close to us. I'm reminded of a story some time ago of a couple, married for many years, out riding in their car. Remember how most cars back a few years had that wide bench front seat? This was before the days when virtually all cars came to have bucket seats. The front bench seat would allow couples who were dating and newly married to sit close to each other. When he was driving, she would snuggle up to him with her arm around him in a loving embrace. Well, it seems that years later while this couple was riding in their Buick, one of the last cars to offer a bench front seat, this wife looked over at her husband and lamented, "You know, Honey, we used to sit close when we'd be out driving in the car, but now I feel so far away from you, me sitting over here, on the right, next to the window, with all that space between us, and you over there on the left. What's happened?" Her husband, sitting behind the wheel responded lovingly to his wife

as he kept his eyes on the road ahead, “My beloved, “I haven’t moved.” When you and I feel far from God, God has not moved. God is still there with us.

Sometimes the witness of one person will remind us once again of how God has been present. Jeannie and I shall always remember one Sunday morning in the winter of 1971 at Christ Church in Alexandria where I was doing my field education while in Seminary. The preacher that Sunday was Bishop Madinda, the newly enthroned Bishop of the Diocese of Western Tanganyika. He was speaking of the hardship and of all that was happening in his land, much of what was horrific, yet he kept repeating the refrain, and I can still remember his pronunciation of the words: He would say, “Christ is in our *middist*, Christ is in our *middist*.” God’s presence as he kept saying those words was palpable throughout the congregation that morning. He knew something that is true for all of us: God is with us. God is Love, no

matter what we may be experiencing. The impact of his witness was profound and lasting.

Today we celebrate the Women and Girls Corporate Communion and breakfast. We are grateful to have as our speaker at breakfast Jodie Pully, President of the Episcopal Church Women of Virginia. For generations now in the Episcopal Church, the ECW has been a strong and faithful voice proclaiming God's love in the midst of some of humanity's most serious needs and dire circumstances. The hearts and hands of the women of the church have long carried out ministries that have confronted injustice and brought the love of God to people who have longed to find hope. Today we will hear about and learn of ways that we can work for justice in face of the serious and tragic scourge of human trafficking. As the Church, God calls us to strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.

Bishop Lawrence of Western Massachusetts may have had only one sermon, “God is Love”, but with that one sermon, perhaps he was on the right track after all. In this coming week, you and I will inevitably encounter an opportunity to respond to John’s words in today’s reading, “Beloved, since God loves us so much, we also ought to love one another.” What will our decision be in that encounter?

*“Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.” Amen.*