

In the name of God, who through the Word and in the Spirit creates, redeems, and sanctifies. Amen.

“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.”

There is such tenderness and longing in the First Letter of John; you can almost feel the writer’s earnestness and the urgency of the appeal to the readers of the letter to remember and return to the core of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

Remember that God, the all-powerful, became humble and human to live among us and die at the very hands of the people God lovingly created, the writer recalls. God still believed that we could become what God intended at our creation, and God let nothing hinder that message of love and longing for us to be God’s children, beloved and healed.

The writer then goes on to tell us what God’s love commands: That it doesn’t stop at our receiving it. The love that God showed each of us must be extended through and by us to those we encounter. The human family

must show among its members the same love God showed us; and we cannot say we know and love God if we don't love each other. It is a hard lesson given with tender words: "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen."

What a stern litmus test for us when we seek to determine how deeply we abide in God and how freely we welcome the Spirit to work through us: How much love do we show toward our fellow human beings? Last week, we read in this same letter how the writer urged the reader to understand that love must be in truth and action, not simply in words. How much we engage in and embody God's love for our fellow human beings is the real indicator of our commitment to our relationship with God, not how we conduct our worship services, or whether and how we recite the Creed. Jesus embodied God's love to his very last breath and beyond; and the epistle writer is urging us to do the same. "The commandment we have from Jesus is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also." That is hard. That is harder still if we try to love purely on our own and without allowing the grace of the Holy Spirit to work through us.

“Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.” This letter challenges us to ask ourselves: Do we embody love to the people who encounter us? It makes me think of two quotes. The first from the Apostle Paul: “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” The second quote I think of in response to the questions, Do we embody love to the people who encounter us? is from the scholar John Dominic Crossan: “Justice is the body of love, and love is the soul of justice.”

To show Godly love is, quite frankly, more than can be asked of a human being. That is why, as the writer says, we were given God’s Spirit to dwell in us. The Spirit, working through us, can accomplish the works of love that God asks of us. But that means being open to the Spirit’s voice, the Spirit’s power, the Spirit’s movement. It means letting go of fear. “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment.”

God did not become human and live among us to condemn and punish us; and God’s love demands that we do not live in the world to condemn and

punish, either. God's love demands that we approach the human family, and ourselves, with openness and generosity so that God, who is invisible, can be seen in us. God, whom we do not see with our eyes, becomes visible to us when we love one another.

So we have the story of Philip and the Ethiopian. Philip is so wide open to the Spirit that he allows her to lead him into the unknown on a wilderness road. And think of how open to the Spirit the Ethiopian must have been: travelling on a wilderness road, some stranger lurking there runs up to his chariot and asks, not for money or favor, but "What are you reading?" and the Ethiopian is open enough to the Spirit to recognise that this stranger may have wisdom to share with him. So they travel together and share the Good News of the breadth, depth, and height of God's love; the Ethiopian has his life renewed in the waters of baptism; and, his work done, Philip is snatched away to proclaim the Good News wherever the Spirit leads him. Love was shown between these two: Love for the stranger, on the part of both; hospitality on the part of the Ethiopian; love of God's living Word as a message for all people on the part of Philip. They are both without fear in this exchange; and it ends in rejoicing.

God's love demands that we give to one another what we have received from God: A love that overwhelms and transforms, that is not about punishment over doctrine or rules, but that is an open and willing acceptance of the work the Spirit can do in and through us. "You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you," Jesus says in today's Gospel. God's Spirit is already at work within us; let us remember the command to love that is the core of our faith and our relationship to God and one another; and let us make God visible in the world with boldness and without fear, for God's Spirit, working within us can do more than we could ever ask or imagine. Amen.