

Our gospel passage today is all about love, and it's complicated. We use the word love for so many relationships: romantic love, platonic love, erotic love, parental love, and filial love. We love our church, we love our country, we love ice cream, and we love God. And God loves us but understanding how God's love works is complicated. It would be easy to misinterpret the first line of our Gospel passage which at first seems like the guilt trip mother (or father) inflicts on her (his) children when they are trying to elicit a particular response. Jesus said 'If you love me, you will keep my commandments.'"

Furthermore if you look at the last sentence of our gospel passage it feels as if we have just entered a circular logic loop wherein the first statement is where we are trying to end. But love is not a circle it is a spiral moving ever outward.

Jesus' words, however they may resonate at a personal level, are not spoken for the benefit of the individual alone but for the individual as he or she relates to his or her community. Somewhere I read that "love multiplies". The very nature of the Holy Trinity, Father Son, and Holy Spirit reflects the dynamic nature of love. Today we hear that Jesus is promising that his Father will send them an "advocate" after he is gone, an advocate that will enable his disciples to share the love of Christ to the communities that they will found. The love that they will share is not the memory of the good and inspiring, if sometimes baffling man who was Jesus Christ. No, they go to share the living Christ, living, energized, and amplified by the Holy Spirit. And that will come to fruition as they begin to love one another.

We obey Jesus' commands out of love for him but in reality for our own good, for our entrance into new life in him. At the Last Supper Jesus said to his disciples "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. (John 13 34-35)" These are the words that are to form Christian community and from Christian community to the entire world. And yes, we are a work in progress!

But what does this mean on a concrete level?

I was having a conversation with a friend the other day and we were discussing faith and the challenges some people have when they go looking for it, usually to no avail. I reflected that it was hard to accept the love of God unless you had actually experienced unconditional love from another person.

The story of Jesus Christ is so difficult, so improbable, that it can be hard to see the value of his sacrifice and glory unless you have felt the love. It can be hard to accept your sinfulness and even harder to accept the gift of forgiveness if you have never felt the love. It can be hard to think about the life that Jesus offers to us now and in the world to come, unless you have felt the love. Trusting in unconditional love gives us confidence in the face of

adversity and the willingness to take chances and risk for the things that are most valuable to us. In the creating of the world, in the sending of his, Son God has shown us unconditional love. Unconditional love is affirming and liberating, sustaining, nurturing and empowering. Think back over your life. Where have you experienced, where are you experiencing unconditional love?

That's a hard one isn't it?

What does unconditional love look like? My friend thought for a moment and then recounted this story. She had known from the time she was old enough to understand that she had been adopted. It had not bothered her until the age of 10 when she was wracked with grief that her birth mother had given her away. She said that night after night she would cry her heart out asking why, why had her birth mother rejected her, why had her birth mother given her away?

It is not hard to relate to my friend's pain. The realization that the woman who had carried her in the womb for nine months and then decided not to keep her was potentially life-changing. It might make the child question her value as a human being – and if you've ever been there, even as an adult, that kind of question is excruciating. There is no "fix" for this situation. The adoption was a reality that cannot be changed. It is not a pain that will magically go away, this is a pain that needs to be endured and transformed and that can only happen with love.

As for my friend's adoptive mother, how did she feel listening to her child's pain, listening to the sobs and knowing at the same time that the child's birth mother's decision had given her this child whom she loved and cared for and whose presence filled a need in her own heart? Joy and grief, happiness and sadness are never very far apart. Our capacity to engage and grow through both can only happen with love.

Night after night her adoptive mother would sit by her side to comfort her, to be with her in this moment, to hold her as she came to terms with what had happened. Her adoptive mother never once reproached my friend for her feelings; she did not express any hurt that she herself felt rejected by the emotions that her daughter was expressing. She just sat with her. That, said my friend was unconditional love. And that is what God does with us. God sits with us night after night listening to our stories when we are willing to share them. God is present in our joy and in our grief in our happiness and in our sadness.

Unconditional love does not prevent us from experiencing the consequences of our behavior. If my friend had attempted to do something that would have caused her harm her adoptive mother would not have stood by and let it happen, just as God has chosen to

intervene at times in this very disobedient world. God still loves us and God is with us as we suffer the consequences of our disobedience.

All of which brings us back to our opening verse “If you love me, you will keep my commandments...and those who love me will be loved by my Father.

It’s a deal clincher if we choose to accept it.

Amen.