

Perfect love

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in St. John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on the Fifth Sunday of Easter and Mother's Day, May 10, 2009.

There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. We love because he first loved us.

1 John 4: 18-19

Jesus uses various images and analogies to illustrate his unique relationship with God and with us. He is the Bread of Life, the Good Shepherd and the Vine. We are the branches and God is the vinedresser pruning and nurturing us to fruition. As long as we remain connected with Christ we will produce the fruits of love and righteousness.

St. John writes that the only perfect love is of God. We love because God first loves us. Real love is more than a feeling, more than a sentiment or an infatuation, far more than a fulfillment of a need for companionship. God's unconditional love is all caring and all giving. The scripture tells us that we can't say we love God and hate another because hate denies God's love. To love or respect everyone sounds simple enough until we have been hurt. Given the difficult people we encounter it seems downright impossible to love everyone. Sure, we all can try to get along, but Jesus is talking about far more than that. He is teaching us that God loves each and every one of us and expects us to love and respect each other. To be sure, loving and liking are not the same. We can't like everyone and we can't expect every one to like us but we can love or respect others as people of God and treat them in the way we want to be treated. That includes those who get on our nerves and annoy us and whom we find it difficult to be in their presence. Only when we see them as one of God's own are we able to be more objective and overcome our own personal feelings to bring out a better attitude in ourselves.

We all begin life as basically self-centered creatures. As infants, we had to have our most basic needs satisfied. As far as we were concerned, we were the center of the universe and had to learn to accept the reality that the world didn't revolve around us. It was only when we developed the inner voice of our conscience that that we matured.

This past week, my children, Dave and Sarah, took part in their grandfather's memorial service. On this Mother's Day, I know that their mother was very much present with them as I thought about the sense of values she had instilled in them. We are reminded today that the primary source in developing our conscience and value system was from our parents. We never fully understand nor appreciate our parents until we have children of our own. It is difficult to assess how well our parents did or how well we are doing our job as parents until we gain a perspective in time. While we know that our own parents occasionally made mistakes, we have to remember that we never grow up until we stop blaming our parents. It is healthier to remember the values we learned from them.

If I were to list some things, my mother taught us about human nature and helped us to understand why people behave the way they do. She taught us about character and about being conscientious. She was always ready to help others in need. I am grateful for the basic points of grammar she hammered into us as well as her love of interesting quotes of notable writers and thinkers. What I remember most was how she could be kind and respectful toward difficult people. She never held a grudge against anyone because she knew that when you cut people off you build a wall around yourself. She who had little self-esteem was especially good at reaching out to encourage those who were unsure of themselves.

When we became parents we quickly realized that our only instruction manual was love, prayer and basic common sense. When things don't go well, we can't blame ourselves and become consumed with guilt. Our children are their own persons and because of that we can neither take all the blame when things go wrong nor all the credit when things go right.

Parenting is like teaching a child how to ride a two-wheeler. You hold on to the seat and push until they learn to balance and pedal on their own. A good parent knows when to let go. That is the essential difference between caring about our children and doing everything for them. Our job is to equip them to be on their own and give them room to grow. We teach them what we know and trust that they will learn from their own mistakes.

One of the most damaging things is the "helicopter mother" who hovers constantly over her child. She is only satisfying her own needs at the expense of her child. Smother love is never in the child's best interest. Just as a coach does not get out on the field and make the plays for the team, so parents can only coach their children on the right plays in the game of life. When they get knocked down and are hurt, we can only encourage them to put their helmet back on and get back in the game.

It is essential that we teach children a sense of values. They may not accept all our values but we still have an obligation to teach what we believe is right and good and true. The important thing is to help them develop character and personal integrity. More important than adopting all our values is to enable them to think for themselves. In the end, we will never be perfect parents and we aren't going to raise perfect children, no matter how hard we try. We do our best to love them, teach them and let them go.

When I officiate at weddings, I hear parents critical of their daughter's new husband or their son's new wife. Wise parents will keep their mouths shut and their opinions to themselves. It is said that a mother hopes that her daughter will get a better husband than she has, but she knows that her son will never get as good a wife as his father has.

Our ability to love will always be imperfect. When we remain connected with Christ, we know that only God's love is perfect. It is the Holy Spirit who supplies us with the strength, the courage and the patience to do the loving and right thing. That is all we can do and that is all we are expected to do.