

Calvary Episcopal Church
Ashland, Kentucky
Sermon for May 6, 2012 ~ Easter 5B
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Today, as we continue our Easter series on the topic *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, we are considering the practice of Intentional Faith Development. Robert Schnase, author of the book by that title, writes:

Intentional Faith Development refers to all the ministries that help us grow in faith outside of weekly worship, such as bible studies, Sunday School classes, support groups, and prayer teams. Congregations who practice Intentional Faith Development offer opportunities for people to learn in community for people at all stages of faith. They offer ministries that help people grow in grace and in the knowledge and love of God. *Intentional* refers to deliberate effort, purposeful action, and high priority (website).

And what is at the heart of faith development for Christians? What is it about our faith that needs “development?” This passage from I John might point in the direction of an answer to that question. "And this is his commandment that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us to do" (I Jn. 3:22).

Jesus commanded his disciples to love. But what kind of love is it that has to be commanded? What kind of love requires so much of the lover? What kind of love must be so bound to obedience? The kind that has to be “developed.” The kind we too easily forget. The kind we need each other’s help to remember. It seems to me that learning about love divine so it can be practiced more and more fully is at the heart of Intentional Faith Development.

I. Love Divine is more than a feeling. "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?" (I Jn. 3:17).

Surely the love of which we read in today's lessons is not the kind of love celebrated in romantic songs, novels, and movies. That kind is commended but not commanded. No. It's a tougher, less attractive strain more in the category of compassion, justice, and inclusion.

A popular song recorded in 1970 by singer Bobby Vinton proclaimed, "I've got that lovin' feeling back again." Well, what happens to a relationship when either or both of the persons involved in that relationship don't have that "lovin' feeling?" How can you base any kind of relationship on something so fickle and unreliable as human emotions? Feelings, as important as they may be, are an inadequate foundation for human relationships.

The Covenant love we read about in the Holy Scriptures is stronger and more dependable than human emotion. Both the Hebrew and Greek words that are used to speak of it mean a decision to do justice toward others, and the commitment to seek the well being of others. If God's love for us were based on God's feelings, we would give God plenty of good excuses to abandon us. But God's love for us is grounded in a decision made in the heart of God before the dawn of time to ensure justice

for each and every one of his creatures and to seek our well-being. God's love for us is more than an feeling, it is a decision. The love of the Christian, likewise, must be more than a feeling.

That kind of love was captured in a photograph of a colleague of mine, The Rev. Robert Wareing. The photo appeared in the media across the country following the funeral of Laura Smither, a little girl in his parish who had been kidnapped and murdered. The photograph showed Fr. Wareing in Eucharistic vestments embracing Laura's parents. What is seen in that photograph is more than a priest hugging two bereaved parents. It is a paradigm of the loving priestly work of that entire community, which went to extravagant extremes to join hands, heart, and minds to find one of God's beloved children. We pray that God will link us, here in this community, in such tangible expressions of love to seek the well-being of others of God's children who are lost - lost in so many ways - lost in hunger, lost in mental illness, lost in loneliness, lost in hopelessness, lost in alienation. As Philip brought the Ethiopian eunuch into the embrace of the church through baptism, may we also find those who have been excluded and wrap the real arms of a real love around them, too.

II. Love Divine is more than words. "...let us love, not in word or speech but in truth and action" (I Jn.3:18).

Ashley Montague, a respected anthropologist and social philosopher of the last century and author of *The Practice of Love*, wrote: "Love is the answer to the problem of being human. However, today, in the midst of our super-abundance of love-talk, there is a super-absence of love action."

What the world needs now is not more songs or poems or sermons about love but love in deed. Love gives itself away for another because of the need of the other. We don't need more members for the "nature of love debating society" but, instead, people who through love get things done that only love can accomplish.

My dad was a loving person - the sort of man who got things done. The kind of man who loved in truth and action. His grandmother, who lived with the family during her last years, had died. The extended family, her sons and daughters, gathered in the parlor of my dad's home. While they argued about who was going to pay for what passed for a burial vault, dad helped the undertaker embalm her. When he finished and they were still arguing, he went out and dismantled an outdoor dance floor he had built, took the lumber to the family cemetery, dug the grave, and built the vault. When he came back to the house, they stopped arguing long enough to ask him where he had been. He told them. Not another word was ever spoken about that vault. The words about what love required had filled the air with a stench worse than death. His loving action was a fragrant offering and sacrifice. This is the kind of love which Christ commanded: one that is better expressed in truth and action than in words.

III. Love Divine is more than our own doing. "We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another" (I Jn.3:14).

The greatest victory of the resurrection is that this new life is always breaking forth out of death, and that means the community of Christ is constantly being created by the reality that already exists in Jesus Christ: The Christian community is valid and worthwhile not because of any decisions we have made, but because of the decision of God in Christ who has chosen and loved us already and com-

manded us to go and choose and love others in the same way. We are to love not with whatever love we can whomp up from within ourselves, but with God's love.

When we are able to dismiss the notion of love as purely an emotion and begin to see that love has to do with the human will in response to God's having chosen and loved us even before we thought of God, then we begin to realize the true validity of the Christian community.

It is the kind of love described by H.H. Farmer when he writes, "The Christian doctrine of love is not a glib and easy doctrine, there is at the heart and center of it the cross. The cross is the ultimate payment in the high cost of loving. This is the unlimited love Jesus has for us and we are commanded to show that kind of love for one another. If we do not, we will not be recognized as his disciple. If we do, it will be the one sure sign of the truth of our claim of discipleship."

On the southern border of the empire of Cyrus, there lived a great chieftain named Cagular, who tore to shreds and completely defeated the various detachments of Cyrus' army sent to subdue him. Finally, the Emperor, amassing his whole army, marched down, surrounded Cagular, captured him and brought him to the capitol for trial and execution. On the day of the trial, he and his family were brought to the judgment chamber. Cagular was a fine looking man of more than six feet in height, with a noble manner about him. So impressed was Cyrus with his appearance that he said to Cagular, "what would you do should I spare your life?" "Your majesty, if you spared my life, I would return to my home and remain your obedient servant as long as I live." Then the emperor asked, "What would you do if I spared the life of your wife?" "Your majesty, if you spared the life of my wife, I would die for you."

So moved was the emperor that he freed them both and returned Cagular to his province to act as governor thereof. Upon arriving home, Cagular reminisced about the trip with his wife. "Did you notice," he said to her, "the marble at the entrance of the palace? The tapestry on the walls as we went down the corridor into the throne room? The chair on which the emperor sat - it must have been carved from one lump of pure gold?" His wife could appreciate his excitement and how impressed he was with it all. But she only replied, "I really didn't notice any of that."

"Well," said Cagular in amazement, "what did you see?" His wife looked seriously into his eyes and said, "I beheld only the face of the man who said he would give his life for mine."

The next time someone tells you about an opportunity for Intentional Faith Development – an adult Sunday School class, an opportunity for children's or youth Christian formation, a mid-week Bible Study – think of it as an opportunity to behold the face of the one who died and rose again for you. Instead of letting the inconvenience of showing up interfere with your participation, consider the importance of an opportunity to let the power of his love transform us and unite us with one another so that it will be clear to everyone that, in truth, we are his disciples.