

For the Love of God

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Jn. 17:20-26

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“For the love of God!” my mother would say when we did something without thinking.
The clean-up followed to rectify our mess.
Then there would be the required sitting in a chair
 for quiet time of reflection on what went wrong.
I confess I often did not agree with her judgments
 and wallowed in indignation.
But I did reflect on that claim, “For the love of God.”
 God’s love did not seem to fit the situation.
 Why in the world was Mom upset if God’s love was involved?
 I didn’t get it, but dared not challenge Mom’s assessment when she was mad!

Years later, however, I gradually understood what was behind the exclamation.
Mom yelled, “For the love of God” to keep from saying something worse.
 It was only exclamation in a moment of exasperation,
 yet the Holy Spirit was saying more than Mom realized.
Her exclamation was not so much about what we did to spur her anger,
 but about her own responsibilities as parent and protector.
For the love of God she held back the punishment we were fully due.
For the love of God she graciously gave another measure of patience.
For the love of God she continued to care and love while dealing correction.

The Gospel According to John, from which we read a part a few minutes ago,
 devotes five chapters, a quarter of the entire book,
 to just one night in the life of Jesus.
It is the night before he is arrested and killed.
For *four chapters* Jesus teaches his closest disciples
 about what is the church and how to continue once he’s gone.
Then, this 17th chapter, is one last, long prayer.
 Our reading this morning is the very last part of that prayer,
 the very last thing Jesus wants to say to God.
In the next verses, Jesus is arrested and his teaching is over.

These last verses of this last prayer is Jesus praying
 for God to *protect* this small band of followers
 for God to be *with* them,
 for God to be *in* them,
 for God to make them not only a fellowship of friends,
 but the very embodiment of God herself.

The Gospel of John declares something no other book does so explicitly,
 that God the Holy and Divine and Almighty,
 has entered the world *in person*
 and has become part of you and me *in person.*

The Gospel of John begins,
 In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.
 He was in the beginning with God.
 Through him all things were made,
 and without him was not anything made that was made.
 In him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

It goes on to say,
 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.
 And we have beheld his glory...

God has come into the world,
 has become human, God Almighty in the flesh,
 for us to see and cheer!
 I can hardly fathom the significance of this,
 and barely have courage to utter what sounds blasphemous.
 Then Jesus prays to God, “so that they may be one, as we are one,
 I in them and you in me...”
 Jesus prays that God come into us.
 In the final act of history,
 God comes into creation and becomes part of creation,
 joining us for a final act of breaking down all barriers and making us right.
 Why? To what purpose?
 Verse 23, “so that the world may know
 that you ... have loved them even as you have loved me.”
For the love of God our Lord and Creator comes.
Because of love, God would give *anything, everything* to be a part of us.
 Jesus prayed, “I made your name known to them...
 so that the love with which you have loved me *may be in them, and I in them.*”
 God’s love has come into us,
 Jesus as love is now within us.
 “*For the love of God*” is both exclamation out of exasperation,
 and is statement of God’s motivation for acting in history and in the world.

There is a *third* way to understand this phrase.
For the love of God we want to do what is right and lovely.
Because of love from God we respond with acts of kindness and compassion.
 Our motivation is not to get something in return
 or to prove our goodness and worth.
 Our motivation is simply expressing the love of God that is now within us.
 But *God adds a twist* at this point.
 We return God’s love, but not to God directly.
 As we receive love from God,
 God turns us around and *sends us* to love others.
 You heard about people pulling up to a Starbucks drive-through, placing an order
 only to find that the customer in the car ahead of them
already paid for the coffee of the strangers behind.
 That’s how God’s love works.

We receive free coffee,
 we can’t thank the one ahead for they have already pulled out and drove away,
 so we find someone else to bless.
 Because of the love we receive from God we love and bless someone else.
 For the love of God, we pass it on.

And that is the point of this prayer by Jesus.
 Verse 21, “so that the world may believe...”
 Verse 23, “so that the world may know...”
 Just before today’s gospel verses Jesus said (verse 17:18),
 “As you have sent me into the world, so *I have sent them* into the world.”
For the love of God for the world
 God has come *to* us, *into* us, become *a part* of us
 so that we might be God’s love for others.
 Our behavior and our identity as Christian
 reveal God to those who have not knowingly experienced God.
 Our kindness, forbearance, patience, confidence, evenhandedness
 bear the Spirit of God for those who have known only criticism, abuse, isolation.

It's not just about being good people.
It's being the very presence of God through who we are.
 The scandal of Christianity is that Jesus is now *in us*,
 God is embodied *in us!*

For the love of God for the world we are made like Christ and sent as Christ.
 What others see in us may be all they know of God!

For the love of God,
 is exclamation, is declaration of God's passion,
 and is our response as God's people to others.
 There is yet a *fourth* way to understand this claim "for the love of God."
 For the love of God people simply express joy in art and song.
 The church-word for this is "praise"
 but it is simply expressing joy for the beauty and goodness we experience.
 Clapping your hands in joy and thanks after a marvelous choir anthem is most appropriate
 It is praise to God and thanks to people.
 For the love of God we praise beauty.

My mother was a painter and sculptor who did serious work.
 But in her later years when she shucked formality
 her art turned toward whimsy and fun, toys and ornaments.
For the love of God driving her from within
 she made whimsical stuff to delight friends and children.
For the love of God pushing forth from within the soul
 people paint, photograph, sing, compose, carve, arrange, decorate.

My neighbors have been busy fixing up their flower beds.
For the love of God welling up within
 they cannot help but be outdoors and bring beauty to their yards.

I have friends who decorate cakes.
 They taste great and look beautiful, ornate frilly-flowered,
 but they decorate cakes out of sheer delight in making a thing of beauty.
For the love of God erupting from creative souls they make things of beauty.

Now, non-believers will say such joy and creativity
 is not unique to Christians
 and that non-Christians can love just as intensely and wonderfully.

Yes! God bless them!

God does not wait for us and our decision to believe
 for God to act through us!

God's love is driven,
 floods over our sand-bagged doctrines,
 is effusive and free and flowing and fun!

God delights in whatever religious language gives God praise.

God holds the hand of children drawing with crayons.

God splashes with whales.

God paints the skies at every sunset.

God bursts buds into flowers and sprinkles bugs and bees.

For the love of God cannot be contained in Christian creeds.

Yet Christians, people of Christ,
are appointed and set forth to express the Holy Spirit of God within.

We people of Christ are appointed and set forth
 to care for God's creation

and witness to God's loving kinship with this world.

For the love of God pours into the world.
For the love of God creates and cares constantly.
For the love of God is the source of every beauty and good.
For the love of God has come into you and calls you.
For the love of God sends us to be good people and stable influence
in this lovely world that needs hope and healing.
For the love of God.
Amen.