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“Love Is A Verb”

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John 13:31-35; 14:15-20

Sometimes love demands expression. In the classic musical *Fiddler on the Roof* there is a scene where Tevye asks his wife, “Do you love me?” She is utterly exasperated, and thinks he has lost his mind. She says: “For 25 years I have washed your clothes, cooked your meals, cleaned your house, given you children, milked the cow, and now you ask me if I love you?” There are times when love demands expression, otherwise you end up like the old Norwegian farmer who loved his wife so much that one day he nearly told her so.

Or you could end up like the intellectual piano playing Schroeder in *Peanuts* cartoons. One day his admirer Lucy asks, “Schroeder, do you know what love is?” He stops playing piano stands up and says, “Love is a Noun, meaning to be fond of, a strong affection for or an attachment or devotion to a person or persons.” He sits down and resumes playing the piano. Lucy sits there stunned, and says, “On paper, he’s great.”

I disagree with both Schroeder and the dictionary that love is a noun. Love is really a verb. Love is active and demands expression, beyond mere words. Words in our time are increasingly meaningless. We talk about the love in relation to toothpaste and deodorant. So while love needs verbal expression, more than anything else, love needs to be put into action. I have learned that when you do not feel loving at all, but act like you do, love follows.

A recent USA Today article prescribed an interesting course of treatment for burned out medical professionals. In order to make patients feel better about their doctors, some administrators are asking doctors to take acting lessons. Very often physicians feel so swamped, stressed-out and exhausted that they cannot feel much compassion for their patients. So these doctors are learning to at least **act** like they care. The ultimate goal is that by teaching doctors to respond as if they were emotionally connected to their patients, they may learn to actually feel the compassion and care they are pretending to have. After constantly dealing with needy, hurting people, all members of the "helping professions" tend to build up a protective layer that helps them distance themselves from the people they serve. There are times when you find yourself overwhelmed and drained, that the best you can do is mechanically go through the motions. It is at the point when you pretend and act in love, that love grows.

When people who have just performed some heroic, life-threatening act in order to save someone's life are asked how they "felt" about what they were doing while they were doing it, the reply is usually "nothing." Here's a stranger who helped pull three children out of a burning house: "I didn't even think about it. It was happening so fast, and I knew we just had to get them out of there." Here's the mother who lifts a huge tree off her son's leg: "I didn't even feel how heavy it was -- until I put it down." Or the lifeguard who saves a drowning child, "I just jumped right in without hesitation." When love and compassion for another take over completely, it is expressed through actions, not feelings. You cannot gradually and cautiously feel your way toward a loving action. Love **IS** action. Genuine love leaps before it looks.

And that expression of love is what we celebrate on Mother's Day. Love in action is the force behind all those meals our mom prepared when she was sick; all those chauffeured trips to soccer, baseball, ballet and piano lessons when she desperately needed time for herself; all those books read to sleepy children by a much sleepier mom; those trips to the emergency room, those checks written for all kinds of things, all the long walks and long talks -- and all those countless things done by mothers juggling careers, kids, community and an active home life. Every mother has walked the floor all night with a sick baby, cleaned countless dirty diapers, smelled like vomit, denied herself food and pleasures, out of love and love alone. Someone once defined maturity is the ability to do what you would rather not do, without complaint. That's not maturity, that's motherhood.

I do not know of many other people who sacrifice and give like mothers do. Even when they don't feel like it. They just keep putting one foot in front of the other and acting in love. Love in action, that's a mother.

Let's listen to some people describing such love...

Jesus' told his disciples in the Gospel of John that by your love, others will know more about you than by anything else you could ever do. "Love one another as I have loved you." For Jesus love was never passive.. He didn't love people just saying it or by simply feeling it. His love was active and sacrificial. Jesus lived a life that embodied love. He healed the sick. He fed the hungry. He comforted the confused. He taught the ignorant. He reached out to children. At the moment of his betrayal to an angry mob who would take him to a cruel death, he healed the servant of his enemy. On the worst of days, as he was unjustly arrested and threatened, he responded with compassion. In the midst of his own pain he took notice of and tended to the pain of another. Jesus loved in good times

and bad. Jesus' love was so great that he went to the cross, suffered torture and death as his greatest demonstration of love in action. Even when he had doubts, even when he did not feel like it, Jesus acted in love.

But that sort of love does not come from human power alone. I believe it is a supernatural gift. And it is appropriate that we talk about such a gift today because this is not only Mother's Day but Pentecost, the day when the Holy Spirit came to the disciples and the Christian Church was born. Pentecost is the birthday of the Christian church, a day to remember the amazing things that only God can do. On Pentecost we pay tribute to the power of the Holy Spirit and the presence of God at work in human life. On that first Pentecost over 3000 people were baptized and the love of God was shared far and wide. It was a gift of the spirit.

In our second Scripture lesson from John's Gospel, Jesus is talking about his imminent death and what his followers should do. The disciples have been dependent upon him for three years, and that relationship was coming to an end. He's talking about his own death in terms the disciples do not understand. But Jesus says to them, that he will not leave them orphaned. "I am coming to you," he says, and his coming is in the form of the Holy Spirit, in the Greek, the *Paraclete*, or the Advocate. Jesus himself is described as a *paraclete* in the First letter of John, as well. Like Jesus, the Holy Spirit gives you access to a supernatural power, the power to do the things you believe you cannot do.

Up until then, the disciples had the assurance that Jesus was right there with them. The very physicality of Jesus has been their source of comfort and reassurance. The miracles, the teaching, the leadership, it has kept them going. Now he's talking about his impending death and they are scared. How will they proceed? What will become of them? Jesus assures them by promising that even after his death he will still be with them. He will encourage them, guide them, bless them even after he is gone.

The *nature* of his presence will change. "In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will still see me," he says. He will be present to them in the form of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth. And that spirit is available to us, anytime, anywhere. The Holy Spirit is the *Spirit of courage*. It allowed those timid and fearful disciples to go out on Pentecost and share the Good News of Jesus Christ so that everyone might learn of God's love for them. It transformed them, and it can transform us. The Holy Spirit is the *Spirit of life*. "Because I live," promises Jesus to his followers, "you also will live." Jesus gives the gift of life — life in this world, and life in the world to come. The Holy Spirit is also the *Spirit of love*. "They who have my commandments and keep them are those who

love me,” says Jesus to his disciples; “...and those who love me will be loved by God, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.” The love spills over into our lives and offers strength in every situation. It is the heart of a spiritual reality that constantly surrounds us.

Now I happen to believe that the spiritual realm is every bit as real as the physical realm. Just because we cannot see it does not mean that it does not exist. And it's not just the Holy Spirit, but all those who have died are present with us in ways we cannot understand. In my experience, someone you have loved is always a part of you, particularly someone who has loved you with an unconditional love. Someone who has held you, dried your tears, comforted you and blessed you, that person is always with you. Even when they are no longer with you, they are still with you. That assurance is really the heart of our faith.

This is exactly what Jesus was trying to convey to the disciples when he assured them that he would always be with them. He was not offering empty words to make them feel better. He was speaking the truth. It is love in action that we celebrate on this Pentecost Mother's Day. We are surrounded by love, a love that is deeper and greater than we will ever know.