

Proper 6a  
Rom 5.6-11  
June 15, 2008  
Fr. M. Dow Sanderson

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Last Wednesday at Morning Prayer, as we sat in Starr Chapel on the feast of St. Barnabas, we were invited to pray Psalm 15. And the 15th Psalm asks us to ponder this question:

*Lord, who shall dwell in thy Tabernacle? Or who shall rest upon thy holy hill?  
Even he that leadeth an uncorrupt life, and doeth the thing which is right...  
He that sweareth to his neighbor, and disappointeth him not, though it were to his own hindrance.*

As we hear the question, and the answer given, we see that the invitation to dwell with God is offered to those who seek to love like God.

We do not naturally “put ourselves out” for the sake of our neighbor. It is not often that we do too many things in this world “though it were to our own hindrance”.

It is a part of our very human nature to love things and people in proportion to their ability to bless us, to comfort us, to give us pleasure.

In other words, it is easy to love when the object of our affection is beautiful, winsome, and charming. Its like loving a puppy! How could we not?

But we all know that there are a lot of people in this world who do not look lovable. They do not behave in lovable ways. And we are not much inclined to minister to their needs, ESPECIALLY when it is to our own hindrance.

But God, on the other hand, loves even the mongrel dog that bites his hand.

In this morning’s epistle, we are described as “enemies of God”. We are called sinners, rebels who are hostile towards their creator.

And in such a state...while we were yet sinners... God loved us... and he loved us so much that he was willing to die for us.

That’s quite a contrast, isn’t it? A contrast between how we love... and how God loves.

But what accounts for this great divide? ...this great chasm between human love and divine love?

In our Thursday morning Bible Study, we have just begun to read a new book called *Jesus of Israel* by Fr. Richard Veras.

I’d like to quote a very short section of it which helps to answer our question. Fr. Veras writes:

*When I was about nine years old, I discovered that my grandfather had a brother whom I had never been told about. When I first heard him mentioned, I was in utter disbelief. Then, I assumed that he had died a long time ago, and I was even more shocked to learn that he was still alive and that we shouldn’t talk about him in front of Grandpa. You see, my grandfather and his brother had a big fight, years before I was born, and they were never again on speaking terms.*

*When I was twenty-four, my grandfather died. At the evening wake, I walked a man who looked exactly like my grandfather. I knew immediately that this had to be the uncle I had never met. After he prayed at the casket, someone introduced him to me, and we proceeded to have an awkward, but polite conversation. It was bizarre to speak to a man who had the face of my grandpa but was a stranger. I wanted to embrace him with all the love I had had for my grandfather...but I restrained myself because I had just met the man.*

*This experience helps me to understand original sin, which is not something we did but a sad condition into which we were born. It's not my fault my uncle was a stranger to me; it was because of a fight that happened... a break in the family... before I was born.*

*We were born into this condition of original sin because of a split that occurred between our first parents and God. Because of this brokenness, we tend to look at God as a stranger. Does he really exist? Does he really love me? Can I trust him?*

I think that is a very helpful illustration of the estrangement between God and man...and it helps us all the more to see the remarkable love of Our Father in heaven who would go to such extraordinary lengths to heal the rift... to end the rebellion.

Like the brothers of Joseph long ago in Egypt, we stare into the face of one to whom we are related, but have long since forgotten. And we are astounded when he says to us, I am Joseph... your brother.

Like Philip the Apostle, we meet Jesus, not truly knowing who he is, and we say to him Lord show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied!

And we are astounded to hear him say to us, Have I been with you so long and yet you do not know me? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father!

*While we were yet sinners... Christ died... for us.*

You see, this sermon today is really a continuation of the sermon I preached two weeks ago. In fact, it is a continuation of the sermon Fr. Dan preached last week, since he, in great humility, quoted me.

Do you remember the seminarian who was being quizzed by the Evangelical? The one who was told "Explain the Gospel to a man getting on a bus... You only have three minutes.

Well, this is the Gospel. If ever you find the need to get quickly to the heart of the matter, go straight to Romans chapter five, and you will never miss your bus!

Because all of the demands of discipleship that Fr. Clarke and I have preached about for the past two weeks are predicated on meeting this stranger at a family reunion.. this Jesus who tells us that he is our long lost brother... and recognizing him for who he is.

It is the "aha" moment that brings us to our knees. It is the tears of joy and reconciliation that flow truly from our hearts when we know down into the marrow of our bones that we have been loved, even when we were at our most unlovable.

*While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.*

And having received this great love and mercy beyond our deserving...

Then... and only then... can we begin to live as Jesus would have us live... and to love as Jesus loves... ministering to our neighbors even though it were to our own hindrance.

And of course, on the Father's Day... we remember our own fathers, who so many times in their lives sacrificed for our welfare.

Some of us are blessed because our Fathers are still living... and others of us are also blessed... because our fathers are praying for us on another shore...

But they... and indeed all of our affections merely reflect that marvelous divine love which on this day comes down from heaven, and upon this altar. This transubstantiating love which feeds and changes our hearts... and fits us for heaven... and sends us forth into the world to tell others with awe and joy....

*While we were yet sinners... Christ died for us.*

Amen+++