

Last Sunday was Mother's Day. I remember with fondness and more than a few chuckles a Mother's Day during the 1990s when I was rector at St. George's, and I began the worship service as I did every Sunday with a children's story. By the end of the story on that Mother's Day long ago, some people in the congregation were sniffing and wiping away tears from their eyes, much to the amusement of some of us less sentimental types. The story I told that day was the classic tale of parental love, titled *Love You Forever*, by the children's author Robert Munsch.

I am sure some of you know it. The story begins with a mother holding her new baby. She rocks him and sings a little song:

"I'll love you forever.

I'll like you for always.

As long as I'm living, my baby you'll be."

As the years go by the baby grows. He becomes a toddler and gets into everything, causing his mother to say in exasperation, "This kid is driving me CRAZY!" But at night she still sings him their special song:

"I'll love you forever.

I'll like you for always.

As long as I'm living, my baby you'll be."

The boy grows some more. He is nine years old, never wants to take a bath, and says bad words when his grandma visits. His mother says she feels like selling him to the Zoo. But still, at night, she sings their song:

"I'll love you forever.

I'll like you for always.

As long as I'm living, my baby you'll be."

The boy becomes a teenager, and of course that is the worst. He has strange friends, and he wears strange clothes, and he listens to strange music. His mother now feels like she lives in a Zoo! But guess what? At night, when he is safely asleep, she still sings to him:

"I'll love you forever.

I'll like you for always.

As long as I'm living, my baby you'll be."

Finally, the boy is all grown up and moves into his own house. But sometimes on dark nights, the mother drives across town, silently enters his house, and as he sleeps she sings to him –well, you know what she sings:

"I'll love you forever.

I'll like you for always.

As long as I'm living, my baby you'll be."

At last, the mother is old and sick. She tries singing the song to her adult son, but is unable to finish it. Her son, however, has learned his lesson well. He knows what to do. Holding his mother close, he rocks her in his arms and sings to her:

"I'll love you forever.

I'll like you for always.

As long as I'm living, my Mommy you'll be."

And when he returned home that night, he stood for a long time at the top of the stairs, remembering. Then, going into the room where his new baby daughter is sleeping, he takes her in his arms and sings:

“I’ll love you forever.

I’ll like you for always.

As long as I’m living, my baby you’ll be.”

And that is where the story ends, with the cycle of love beginning all over again.

Today’s Gospel reading, and all the Gospel readings for the remaining Sundays of this Easter season, are taken from what is known as Jesus’ ‘farewell discourse’ at the Last Supper on the night before his death on the Cross. The farewell discourse is Jesus’ parting message to his closest friends. They had been together for three years, and now he must leave them, though the disciples do not yet fully understand how or why. Jesus’ message is urgent: “Little children,” he says to the disciples, “I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me” but “Where I am going you cannot come.”

We know how hard it can be to say goodbye to those we love. We search for words to convey what we really mean and feel and try to compress into a few thoughts the most important things about a deep relationship which has evolved over time. At the Last Supper, Jesus expressed it this way: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”

Take note: Jesus was not making a suggestion or a recommendation. It was a commandment. Jesus was not handing out some religious advice that he thought might be good for the disciples if they ever got around to following it. No. He gave them, and us, a new commandment. Jesus’ directive to “love one another as I have loved you” was his farewell command. It was his final instruction to them, and to us. It was his highest teaching, the culmination of all his previous teachings combined. The commandment to love others was Jesus’ bottom line for any who wish to follow him and enter the Kingdom of God.

Jesus told the disciples, and us, that it is by loving one another that everyone will know you are my disciples. That is the bottom-line of Christianity.

It is said that as people who try to love, we must be prepared to live with our own imperfections. Our own life’s experience has shown us that we will inevitably fall short in the love we give. If we are to love one another as Jesus loves us, then we must be ready to put aside our grudges, our hurts, and our righteous anger.

Margaret Guenther was an Anglican priest, author, and a truly gifted authority on Christian spirituality who wrote about the challenges of loving. She expressed it in a way that I am certain all of us can identify with. She wrote, as a person of deep humility and honesty, that “I tend to love with my fingers crossed. I am ready to love almost everyone, but surely. I cannot be expected to love the person who has harmed me. Or who does not wish me well. Or who seems hopelessly wrong-headed. Surely, I am allowed even one holdout, one person whom I may judge unworthy of my love. But the commandment Jesus gave has no loopholes; it demands that we let go of our pet hates, the ones we clutch like teddy bears.”

I must confess to sharing Margaret Guenther’s inclination to love at times with my fingers crossed.

But let’s be realistic about this love that Jesus is calling us to model as the one true indicator that we are indeed the Christians we profess to be. I believe that the type of love Jesus was speaking of was not primarily an emotion, but more an act of the will. When Jesus tells us to love our

neighbours, I doubt he is referring to some cuddly, fuzzy-wuzzy type of emotional love, because we cannot produce on demand a cozy emotional feeling of love towards someone. It cannot be done.

On the contrary, Jesus is telling us to love others by our willingness to work for their well-being even if it means sacrificing our own well-being. In Jesus' terms, we can love our neighbours without necessarily liking them.

What is beyond dispute, however, is that it becomes easier to love others when we believe in our head and feel in our heart that God first loves us. We need to beware of becoming so focused on Jesus' challenging command to love others that we overlook that he also said, "Just as I have loved you." We don't want to lose sight of the reassuring truth that when it comes to love, God initiates and God's love is always available to us, especially at those times in our lives when we feel the need for God's love the most. God does indeed say to us, "I'll love you forever. I'll like you for always. As long as I'm living, my child you will be."

As Saint Paul made clear, love is at the core, it is the foundation, of every spiritual grace that we might ever hope to experience in our lives. Think of it this way. All of us want to live joyfully. But what is joy? Joy is love set free.

And all of us long to live peaceful lives. But what is peace? Peace is love that accepts the world as it is, not as it ought to be.

Similarly, patience is love that persists despite injustice.

Kindness is love, expressed in gentleness.

Generosity is love, given without thought of reward.

Faithfulness is love, that believes without guarantees.

Gentleness is the true nature of love.

Do not forget that long before you knew how to love, or even knew what love is, God loved you.

And so it is that I like to imagine that each night as we drift off to sleep, the voice of the Divine one, speaking from somewhere deep within God's immense universe, softly sings to each one of us,

"I'll love you forever.

I'll like you for always.

As long as I'm living, God's child you will be." **Amen.**

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15 May 2022

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