

What it Means to Love God
April 23, 2006
Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliott, Jr.

I would like to share some thoughts with you this morning about the Collect for the Day. It reads *O God, who hast prepared for those who love you such good things surpass our understanding: Pour into our hearts such love toward you, that we loving you in all things, may obtain the promises, which exceed all that we can desire; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever. Amen.*

There's a well-known joke that is repeated from time to time when questions of fund raising have to be dealt with. Someone is trying to sell tickets for a concert, or maybe it's an organ and brass recital, or something up in the auditorium in the Parish House. They approach a friend who says, *I'm sorry I can't come, but I'll be with you in spirit.* Whereupon the person with the tickets replies, *Good. Where would your spirit like to sit? In a ten dollar seat or a thirty dollar one?*

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We may smile at this, but underneath it is a serious principle. A theme running through the writing of John the Evangelist is his idea of what it means to love God. Always there is steel underneath the velvet glove, for the word *love* hardly appears without words like *do* or *obey* following on its heels. Again and again in his Gospel, any claim we may make to love God is immediately tested by John's insistence that love means doing. Loving God means doing the will of God. If claims to love do not show themselves in action and commitment, then they are invalid.

It is interesting to look at the scriptural context for this prayer in all three years of the lectionary cycle. Only if we do this can we come to realize the *good things as surpass our understanding*. To enter these scriptures we must enter the upper room. Jesus is gathered with his disciples and he is giving them the great body of

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reflection and teaching that is the particular gift of John the Evangelist.

At the point at which we join the disciples in the upper room, Jesus is speaking about the nature of love. He is very blunt and uncompromising. Any claim to love him or to love God is quite invalid unless it issues in obedience to him (Jn. 14:23-24). Jesus then begins to speak of the gifts that can enrich our human experience if we are prepared to form a relationship of loving obedience with him.

The first of these gifts (Jn. 14:26) is that we will have a sense in our lives of the presence of our Lord's spirit, the **Holy Spirit**. That Spirit, Jesus says, will teach us all things. In other words, a real relationship with Christ is a growing and deepening and maturing relationship. It does not stand still. We do not get into

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the position of trying to move through our adult experience with a childish level of faith.

The second gift (Jn. 14:27) is the mysterious thing referred to in our English Bible as *peace*. The word Jesus would have used at that moment is *shalom*, a much richer and more complex term. *Peace* in this sense does not mean tranquility, lack of challenge, or restfulness. We can experience the peace of Christ without any of these things. Experiencing the *shalom* of Christ is to taste moments when in an almost inexpressible way these seem to come together for us. The shalom of Christ comes when we experience the conviction that in Christ everything somehow makes sense.

The third gift of Christ (Jn.15:1-8a) is his giving us his own flow of love and energy. For this, Jesus uses the image of a tree and its branches. The tree sends the

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flow of its life through the branches. Without that flow the branches are dead. As we receive Christ's energy and life we put it to work in the world of our own lives. Here again, steel appears under the velvet glove. If we do not use this gift, it ceases to be given.

The fourth gift our Lord offers us (Jn.15:11b) is again mysterious and difficult to define, even though it is too much of a reality in countless Christian lives to deny. Jesus offers his joy. Perhaps it helps to say first what this joy is not. It does not necessarily mean being happy. There can be joy amid tears. For some rare souls there can be joy in great suffering, not physical suffering, but anguish and distress, and when we see this, it humbles us and we never forget it. We know that such joy is utterly genuine. It is not an enforced and ghastly euphoria coming out of a denial that will have to be paid for at a later stage.

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The fifth and last gift Jesus offers is the gift of his friendship (Jn.15:14b). Here again the link is immediately made to obedience. We are the friends of Christ to the degree we do what Christ commands. As we began this list of gifts, so we end. To receive the gifts of Christ, or promises, as the Collect put it, we must offer in return the one gift we have to offer to our Lord: our *loving obedience*. **AMEN.**