

PILGRIM CONGREGATIONAL UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
The Rev. John Tamilio III, Senior Minister
Sunday, 17 May 2009 — Easter VI

Sermon: “Love is the Answer”
Scripture Lessons: John 15:9-17 and 1 John 5:1-6

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Cinco de Mayo 2009 marked the ten year anniversary of the death of my best friend, Jason DiDonato. Many of you met Jason’s widow, Katie: she has been here a couple of times, most recently for my Installation service. Jason was killed in a car accident just south of Buffalo exactly one month before I was ordained.

Jason and I grew up in the same church in Beverly, Massachusetts, so his service was held there. I was asked to deliver the eulogy. His wife also asked me to select a Scripture reading that I felt would be appropriate. I selected today’s Gospel Lesson: John 15:9-17. It was one of the hardest things I ever had to read. Tears choked my throat as I moaned-out the words, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.” How I ever got through that reading, I will never know. There but for the grace of God go I...

This is one of the most powerful passages in all of the Gospels. Jesus is fully opening his heart to his closest friends and he makes it clear: love is the answer. It does not matter what the question is: love is the answer.

Let’s dig into this text a bit, though. Jesus is not just talking about the love one has for friends — a congenial type of love. He is talking about *agape* love. *Agape* is a Greek word that means divine, unconditional, self-sacrificial love. Obviously one immediately thinks of Jesus — that he laid down his life for humanity — but the First Letter of John pushes the envelope further. John writes, “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us — and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.”

There is a divine command there: because Christ laid down his life for us, we are to lay down our lives for our sisters and brothers.

I think that was why I burst into tears when I read this Gospel Lesson at Jason's funeral; I knew that he was one of the few people that would lay down his life for me, and I would have done the same for him. You do not encounter too many people like that in your lifetime. If you find one, you are blessed. My father always said, "If you only have *one true friend* in your life, you are a lucky person."

But it is one thing to lay down one's life for one's friends. What about doing it for a stranger, or even for an enemy? This is a divine command as well. Elsewhere Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?"¹ Indeed, we are called to live lives of love — to embody the *agape* love that God has for creation.

It is hard to do, no question about it, but it is only through such love of the enemy that we will heal this broken planet. In one of the *Peanuts* comic strips by Charles Schultz, Charlie Brown and Lucy were engaged in a conversation. Lucy had a disgusted look on her face. Charlie Brown was pleading with her to be tolerant with outstretched arms, saying: "Lucy, you must be loving. This world really needs love. You have to let yourself love to make this world a better place in which to live!" Lucy whirled around and screamed back: "Look, blockhead — the world I love. It's people I can't stand!" It brings to mind the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, who said that Hell is other people.

In his poem "Reconciliation," one of America's greatest poets, Walt Whitman, wrote these words:

*WORD over all, beautiful as the sky!
Beautiful that war, and all its deeds of carnage, must in time be utterly lost;
That the hands of the sisters Death and Night, incessantly softly wash again,*

¹ Matthew 5:43-46 (NRSV).

*and ever again, this soil'd world:
 ... For my enemy is dead — a man divine as myself is dead;
 I look where he lies, white-faced and still, in the coffin — I draw near;
 I bend down, and touch lightly with my lips the white face in the coffin.*

Reflecting upon Whitman's words, Dr. Linda Sue Grimes writes, "The speaker approaches the dead enemy in his coffin, and instead of cursing him and taking joy in his death as the ordinary person would do, the speaker proceeds to 'Bend down and touch lightly with my lips the white face in the coffin.' He kisses the face of the enemy." Why does the narrator do this? Did he kill the man and, therefore, feels a sense of guilt or remorse? Does he do this out of some anti-war sentiment? I think it runs deeper than that. Seeing the man as "divine" as himself, he sees in him the face of God and is moved to express his compassion and love.

About eight or nine years ago I watched a story on one of those TV news magazines like Dateline or 20/20. I do not recall all the details, but it was a story about a Vietnam veteran who killed a Viet Cong soldier in a hand-to-hand struggle. The two encountered one another in the middle of the jungle and immediately began fighting. The American soldier killed the Vietnamese soldier with his bayonet (I believe). Afterwards, he went through the man's pockets and found a photograph of his enemy with a young girl sitting on his lap. For some reason, he felt compelled to keep the picture.

Years later, the man read a feature story in the paper about a woman from North Vietnam who lost her father in the war. The details were eerily similar. Included in the story was a photo of the woman and her late father. The picture was almost a duplicate of the one the American soldier removed from the corpse thirty years beforehand.

The man made a trip to Vietnam to meet the woman and to return the photograph he kept all those years. The two embraced and shed a river of tears. The man apologized for killing her father and the woman forgave him.

I remember talking to some people after that story aired. They said, "Things like that happen in war. Had the American soldier not killed the enemy combatant,

he would have been killed himself.” But that’s not the point. The story was not an illustration of how *all’s fair in love and war*. The story, from my perspective, was about love. Like the narrator in Whitman’s poem, the American soldier felt compassion and love for the enemy and, although removed from that struggle in the jungle three decades prior, he was able to share that love with the man’s child in a cathartic moment of grace. By embracing the man’s daughter, he was essentially touching his lips lightly against the divine white face in the coffin.

War, regardless of the reason, is wrong. Hatred, regardless of the wrong another has committed against you, is wrong. Violence is not just the antithesis of peace: it is a means of dehumanizing ourselves and denying the divinity that exists in the soul of another. By hurting another, you hurt yourself. By hating another, you hate yourself. This is not just a reiteration of some Eastern philosophical maxim: *we are all connected in the symbiotic circle of life*. If we love God by loving others, then the converse is true: we reject God through the rejection of others.

No, life is not easy, and religion is not a satchel-full of ready-made answers that will solve all of the problems we face on this journey. But regardless of the questions, I believe that *love is the answer*. In his song “Mind Games,” John Lennon said it best: “Love is the answer. And you know that for sure.”

“This is my commandment,” Jesus said, “that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” The ultimate call to the Christian life is one of self-sacrifice. It is to embody the Christ — to model his love by laying down one’s life for others: friends as well as enemies. By doing so, we will know that Christ is with us until the end of the age. By doing this we will respond to the world’s hatred by saying that love indeed is the answer. Amen.