

EASTER 5 B

SERMON for April 28, 2024 Grace Lutheran, Victoria
TEXT: John 4: 7-21, John 15, 1-8
TITLE: "The Power of Love"

In the United States there's a government agency called NASA, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. An arrogant name, don't you think? How much space do they administer?

And on the NASA website, they say, (quote): "We are scientists, engineers, IT specialists, (etc.) ... working together to break barriers to achieve the seemingly impossible." In another part of their website, they say that one of their jobs is to "inspire the world". That must be the PR department's job!

I must say, though, to their credit, there is some fascinating information about the universe. Here's a quote: "The most distant objects in the Universe are 47 billion light years away, making the size of the observable Universe 94 billion light years across. How can the observable universe be larger than the time it takes light to travel over the age of the Universe? This is because the universe has been expanding during this time." Now, you may ask, "How do they know all this?" Well, they calculated it. This is the power of mathematics. I mention this because astrophysicists, and other scientists as well, are handling the what-seems-to-be most powerful thing in the universe: knowledge. And in our time in history, technological knowledge is king. The truth is, there is one thing more powerful than knowledge: it is love.

Celine Dion is a little person with a powerful voice that overflows with emotion, and she sings a wonderful song called, "The Power of Love". The last line of the song ends with the words, ". . . I'm ready to learn the power of love." Of course, she's singing about romantic love, but it's true about love in general.

Our almighty God wants everyone to learn the tremendous the power of love. It's the power that can change children from selfish and stubborn brats into adults who are capable of loving others. Love is the power that gives us the strength to be weak: to be psychologically flexible and spiritually generous toward others. God wants all of us to take and use this divine power, the power of love. To people who are unloved, it's like a warm, bright light in a cold, dark place. Love has power to heal our spirits, and often, even our bodies.

Here's a quote from Pope Francis:

“... if we wish to be true disciples of Christ, we are required to become ... instruments of His merciful love, setting aside every type of marginalization. To be ‘imitators of Christ’ [among] the poor or sick, we must not be afraid to look them in the eye and to draw closer with tenderness and compassion, to touch and embrace them ... [and] We. . . need to be accepted by them. A gesture of tenderness, a gesture of compassion ... (they are part of love) ...” Finally, Pope Francis writes: “If evil is contagious, so is good. Therefore, good must increasingly abound in us. Let us be ‘infected’ by good, and spread good to others!” (Angelus, Feb. 15, 2015)

When the Pharisees asked Jesus, “What is the greatest commandment of all of God’s Law?” he replied, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbour as yourself.” And in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus quoted the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Love could be the healing of the world, if more people practised it.

I remember a song I learned in Sunday School: “Love, love, love is the greatest gift of all.” It’s the greatest gift because it’s the greatest power that God has given to human beings. It’s life-changing, because love breeds more love. It grows and multiplies. Sometime love “divides” because some reject it. But with persistence, it

can soften hard hearts.

Of course, love isn't always easy. It often takes great energy and sacrifice. And if you're like me, you're often look for ways to avoid loving your neighbour: "Don't bother me, I'm busy."

Or: "I don't have the energy."

Or, "What can one person do?"

Or, "I don't know what's best for that person; I need time to figure that out (lots of time)."

This is often what I tell myself. I'm very good at delaying and putting off what I know I ought to do. Maybe you are too.

Of course, realistically, we need to prioritize, in our individual lives and also within the church. For instance, how can we best help needy people in foreign countries?

Often that's by feeding the hungry and providing disaster relief. But in the long term, people need education, a caring community, and a place to find faith and spiritual strength to meet the future. Therefore, to love others means trying to provide what they need most: whether it's bodily needs or friendship or education or moral support, but most of all, spiritual help, especially the time and opportunity to appreciate God's most precious gifts, namely faith, hope, and love.

In First Corinthians chapter 13, the apostle Paul says that faith, hope and love are the most important things to have. And Paul describes love as: a humble spirit, patience, kindness, a charitable attitude, consideration for others. Love, Paul says, is not insisting on your own way but bearing with other people, always trusting, hoping, and persevering.

The Greek word Paul uses for this kind of love is *agape*: divine love. This is love that comes down from God to us and moves out from us to others. This is more important than any gift or ability or talent or ministry, because, as I said, the power of love is the greatest power in the world, a power even greater than knowledge. A few chapters earlier (1 Cor. 8:1) Paul said: “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.”

Another thing that St. Paul says in the “love chapter” (1st Corinthians 13) is that love is eternal! Love is the gift that outlasts all others. Everything else passes away, but love is eternal. It has a ripple effect through your family and your church and the whole society. Love’s influence and effects spread outward like ripples on a pond, even down to future generations.

The author and religion teacher Eric Butterworth tells a story (which is in one of “Chicken Soup for the Soul” books) about a college sociology class that was sent into the Baltimore slums to take case histories of 200 young boys. The students were required to write an evaluation of each boy’s projected future, and in almost every case, they wrote, “He hasn’t got a chance.”

About twenty-five years later, another professor came across that earlier study, and decided to do a follow-up study. He couldn’t find 20 of the boys, but the new study found that 176 of the remaining 180 boys, had gone on to surprising success, and quite a few of them had become lawyers, doctors, and prominent businessmen.

When these grown men were asked for the reasons that contributed to their success, the one thing they all pointed to, was a particular teacher who had influenced them. This teacher was still alive, so the professor went to visit her, and asked how she had influenced these boys to become so successful when they

seemingly were destined for poverty and crime. “Well, it’s really very simple,” she said. “I loved those boys.”

Love is the greatest power in the world, but often it is difficult to practise. With teenagers, you sometimes need to use what’s called “tough love”. That is, you set boundaries and make rules with specific consequences if they’re not followed. As a parent, you need to allow teens to take the consequences of their actions. But love also means being willing to rescue them from some of the pain of those consequences. The biggest act of love is to always be there when a family member need helps, especially when they turn to you looking for grace and mercy and relief.

Then there’s the matter of the everyday loving of people you converse with. Listening carefully and responding honestly is the loving thing to do. But what if they begin to criticize you or get angry at you? Love in that case is listening calmly and taking criticism politely.

I came across a little article in the Globe and Mail the other day, entitled: “What should I do if I’m taken hostage at work?” Police Sergeant Larry Chavez of Sacramento, California, offers this advice: “Make eye contact as a sign of respect. Speak in a calm voice. Don’t display fear or anger. Let the person give vent to their feelings or whatever they have to say. Make sure the disgruntled person knows you’re paying attention. Don’t doodle nervously or stare off into space ... Don’t antagonize or belittle the person, or minimize his concerns or dare him to shoot.” Hmm ... When you think about it, these are actually ways of carefully showing love and care!

I say all this to illustrate how complex love is, with endless implications for living. Yet, in a way, love is the simplest thing in the world! It’s simply doing what’s best

for others, when they need it; and seeking their welfare as much as your own.

The thing that makes loving so difficult is that we human beings are by nature selfish. We're not as virtuous as Jesus, so we cannot love as faithfully and fully as he did. But as followers of Jesus, we can keep trying and get better at the art of love.

Part of that process, I believe, is to confess our sins on Sundays and on other days, and take the Holy Communion when it's offered. Through those "means of grace", we receive God's forgiveness and the assurance that we are indeed loved by God, without conditions. No ifs, ands or buts. You and I are loved.

After all is said and done, we can only stand in awe of the enormity of God's love for us. We can only be amazed at God's amazing grace, who went so far as becoming flesh in Jesus the Christ. He was God among us, taking all our sins upon himself in order to maintain a love-relationship with us. Our astonishing God condescended to love us in Christ; and the only proper response is to take God's power to love, and use it, following the example of Jesus.

Amen.

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION**EASTER 5 B****April 28, 2024**

With confidence in God's boundless power and infinite love, let us pray for ourselves, for all people, and for all Creation.

Dear God our Creator, Abba, Father and mothering God, through your presence in Holy Baptism You have grafted us Gentiles into the tree of Israel, and made us branches of the True Vine. Help us to be strong branches, bearing the fruit of love, kindness, and tender care.

Dear God our Creator and Benefactor, we praise and thank You for the gifts You have given us through Jesus Christ: forgiveness of sins, freedom from fear, joy in service, inner peace, family identity, and a heavenly future. Help us to direct these gifts towards our family, our friends, our neighbours, and towards all we meet, especially those whose spirits are low or whose faith is weak.

Dear God our Creator and Preserver, we pray for pastors, deacons, teachers, and care-givers who are working with and for others to help them to become healthier, stronger, and more self-sufficient. We pray also for frontline workers and first responders, and humanitarian aid workers in the deprived and embattled areas of the world. Help us also, in our time and wherever we find ourselves, to share Christ's riches, by our words and by our deeds.

Dear God, our Creator and Master, we pray for the leaders of the world, and especially for the leaders of our country, that they may seek justice, love kindness, and walk humbly in Your presence. Motivate them to seek peace, even when it means remaining engaged in difficult talks and peacemaking efforts; when making compromises for the sake of the greater good is required, and when self-sacrifice is the cost of leadership.

Dear God, our Creator and Healer, we pray for those who are suffering the trials and hardships of chronic illness, the effects of medical treatment, and for those who are feeling stressed or anxious about their present life circumstances. We pause now to name them, either silently or out loud ...

Dear God, our Creator and Power who raised Jesus from the dead, we pray for those who are mourning the death of loved ones. Give them the strength and clarity of mind to do the tasks necessary during this difficult and upsetting time in their lives. Bless them with faith, courage, and health of body and spirit, to negotiate the difficult days ahead, and to find the peace that comes from trusting in You.

All these things, and whatever else is on our hearts and minds for which we have no words, we raise them to you, trusting you know our deepest needs and will respond according to your eternal purposes and plans. We pray all this by the power of the name of your Son, Jesus the Christ, our Lord and Saviour.

AMEN.