

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time

February 1, 1998

Readings: Jeremiah 1:4-5,17-19  
I Corinthians 13:1-13  
Luke 4: 14-30

This is the beautiful hymn to love, the hymn of love, in the first letter to the Corinthians. We hear it so often, yet we could never exhaust its depth or plumb its beauty.

In a recent homily, I tried to develop the notion of love. In trying to explore the mystery to some extent, I suggested that love was giving space, affording space to grow, for oneself or for another. Today I'd like to explore another dimension of love, perhaps taking cue from the fact that this reading is used very often, not to say too often, at marriage ceremonies. These are thoughts that I like to share with people at weddings, and I'd like to share them today with you.

Too often, I think, certain dimensions of love are passed over in silence by preachers. Normally we start by saying that, of course, we are talking about Christian love; so we're not talking about human love - this erotic, passionate, emotional, bodily love. We're not talking about that. Then we go on to outline the three famous levels of love: there's that erotic level, then there's the *philia* level of friendship, and then there's the Christian level, the charity level, the agape level. We are seemingly oblivious to the fact that all these levels do and can and must interpenetrate one another -- if you'll excuse the expression. And why is that? Why are we afraid of this? This is a love which enfolds us, which preoccupies us, which fascinates us, which guards and guides us from the very beginning of our conception, from the very beginning of our lives. It enfolds and directs us and energizes us as God's love itself. As the first reading says, "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you." In that same matrix is the intimate bodily connection, this mysterious human form of love which enfolds us. And this happens all the way through to grey hairs and old age, as the psalm sings today, "From my mother's womb you have been my help, and I proclaim your wonders still."

How much time and energy and thought do we direct towards making ourselves attractive? How much time do we spend thinking about it? Psychologists say we are probably preoccupied with this many times a minute. It's the bodily emotional dimension; it's the level of passion and attraction. Why do we have to leave this to the poets to talk about, those priests of many centuries past? Why do we leave it to the province of psychologists and therapists, those who have, with some good reason, been called the priests of the 20th century? Why don't we hear more from Catholic priests or Christian ministers about this dimension of love which is so present to us, which must be integrated into this whole picture in order to be real and dynamic. What are we afraid of?

God wasn't afraid of this. He's the one who created it. He's the one that made us in His image, all of ourselves in His image, so that all our energies and all of our desires and all of our strivings can mirror Him, mirror His own energy. Jesus certainly had no fear of it. God Himself not only had all

of this energy and potency eminently in His own being, but he came to share our own gritty human reality, and wonderfully so.

Look at the Gospel today. All those people marveled and were "amazed at the gracious words which flowed from His mouth". This was not just because He was God, but because there was a human attraction there, a physical magic there. Look at the passionate friendships He had in His own life with both men and women, with Martha and Mary, with Lazarus and John, the beloved disciple who reclined on His breast at supper. Look at the woman who is traditionally called Mary Magdalene: how could she feel so confident and attracted as to go into a hostile environment and kneel down and wipe His feet with her tears and pour oil over them. Neither she nor Jesus was embarrassed by this or pulled back from it. And certainly, in the Scriptures, when they speak about the love between Christ and His Church, between God and the human race, in marital terms, in terms of the primordial sacrament of a man's love for a woman, the very efficacy of that symbol and that expression depends on our appreciation of, and our deep resonance with, that primordial, human, bodily sacrament.

It is the same with the Song of Songs. How many of us are truly familiar with the spectacular, vibrant imagery there, with this intoxicated delight in human love, in human passion, with no regard for offspring or anything of the sort? Just the reality of love in itself. Of course, the Song of Songs refers to the marvelous love of God for His people, the marriage between Christ and His Church, between Christ and the individual soul. But once again, we cannot appreciate that without appreciating the image used for it, that is so close to our human experience. More than that, if we are not vibrant enough, voluptuous enough, energized enough to experience human love and human passion, how do we ever think we are going to have the level of energy and consecration and power and vibrancy necessary to be married to God Himself?

That is why I am so sick and tired and irritated with Christian preachers, of whatever denomination, who have nothing but sanctimonious moralizing to offer about this dimension of human life. And why is that? Clergypersons are caricatures to most people. And rightly so. How many do you know who are half people, who are half real, who are totally out of touch, literally out of touch, with themselves and with other people? There may even be a vague whiff of hypocrisy about it, but certainly it is something very sad. And this is across the board: not just Catholic preachers, or even Christian preachers, but, in fact, many of other faiths and traditions as well. Nor does it just concern the unmarried, but also the married. For, let's be clear about this. It is not simply an issue of celibacy, as if that were the ultimate factor here. I think it's more than that. I think it's a way the Christian message has been presented. I would call it a top-heavy presentation of the Christian message.

When I was eighteen and a young Jesuit, I remember I spoke to a slightly older confrere. He must have been really old, perhaps in his early twenties. I said, "Love is about giving and receiving." And he reared up in indignation and said, "Love is about giving." Period. I'm sorry, but that is a very dangerous approach. Too often it is the Christian approach. When we see ourselves as the one higher up, situated to help, to serve, to love others from above, to aid the really needy, the victims, it leaves us, or runs the risk of leaving us, in an isolated, cool, controlling position. Now, I am not trying to denigrate the necessity or the reality of that type of love, that type of ministry.

But what I am saying is that all those who engage in that type of ministry, whether religious or lay, must also have the potential and reality of another dimension of love, the human dimension of love in their own lives. They need it for the sake of the ministry itself, so that it can be truly love; for the sake of themselves, and for the sake of their experience of God.

After all, who is this God we are talking about? Where does the experience of Him lead us? This was a fascinating revelation in my own life. We are going back at least 10 years now, and I remember speaking to my spiritual director and superior in the monastery, saying, "You know, I'm in a bit of a quandary here. The more I try to make progress in the solitude, the more I try to deepen my life in prayer, the more I seem to succeed in having an experience of God, then the more I appreciate human love, the more I resonate to the beauty of people, to the beauty of creation. I'm not spared that, I'm not freed from that, I'm not brought above that by my lofty love of God. I'm immersed more in the density of all of life, of all of creation. That's pretty scary. Is that what is supposed to happen?" He could do nothing but nod in agreement.

I was also speaking recently to a young priest who lives out in the West. He said to me something very similar. He said, "Suddenly, all things seem to be tingling, seem to be electrified, seem to have some kind of erotic energy, seem to be energized by something. I mean everything and everyone."

It's what the philosophers and theologians call cosmic eros. Even the old philosophers knew that love "makes the world go 'round". Everyone and everything is connected. It's the attraction that, on the lowest level, brings two stones together in gravity, or atomic particles together, but which also, in part, energizes the vibrant love of angels who behold the face of God. It's that love which St. Thomas speaks of, which Dante mentions in the final phrase of every three-fold division of his Divine Comedy, with the words: "This is the love which drives the sun and all the stars." That's the level and type of love we are talking about.

God is the sexiest thing there is. And He is that not just because all our energies, all our powers, all our potential is marshaled when we love God, or that He loves us with all His energy and potential, as I remarked a moment ago. It is because He is the one who infuses creation with His superabundance of energy and love, with which we must be in contact. And yet, we are so afraid of it.

So, what should we do when we go out into the world and see all these things? In past centuries, the wealthy would have paintings, etcetera, in their homes with scantily clad or erotically draped figures, and this was art, this was something apart, something for the rich. Well go outside now, look at the sides of buses and telephone booths and tell me what you see. Look at the Calvin Klein ads. Look at the perfume and jeans and underwear ads and tell me what you see. What do you see? It's up to you what you see. Do you see something dangerous and sleazy and cheap? Is that the eye you have? Or do you see what's there? Do you see the image of God? Do you see something of beauty? Do you see something that raises you up? Do you see something that is Divine? Is it an experience of God for you?

"Oh, give me a break!" you say. "How can you be so naive? You think that is what is in the mind

of the people who are putting those things up? Tasteful though some of them may be, great photographic art though it may sometimes be, do you think that's the intention?" And I say, "Who cares what the intention is! And, while we're on the subject, how do you know what the intention is? How do you know what drives the human heart behind that? How do you know what inkling of beauty may be there, feeding, perhaps even unconsciously, their motivations and their actions? At the very least they have to be aware that this is appealing, attractive, that somehow this strikes a resonant and deep chord in people. They have to be awake to that."

What you see is often sublime. And if you don't see it as sublime, that's your problem. It's your eye that is not pure. And that's what we are called to see; that's what we are called to share. So, let's grow up. Let's follow St. Paul's advice in 1 Corinthians today, where he says, "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child." Let's assume as adults the whole of our humanity, the whole of our human experience at every moment, and not have some kind of prissy, whiny reaction about this being dangerous or non-Christian. It is not. The problem is in us, having a prissy or whiny reaction rather than fully assuming our full identity in Jesus Christ, our full identity as human beings. That's what it means to become an adult, as opposed to that other reaction which is a sure and certain sign of spiritual immaturity--not to mention human immaturity, as we already should know.

I'd like to finish these thoughts with an application that might help us to understand further the dimensions of this love. I refer to something which has captured, and I think rightly, the imagination of so many people over the past months. You may not share the fascination, yet because it is so culturally significant, it is important for us at least to appreciate and try to understand it. No, I'm not talking about the scandals of President Clinton. I'm talking about the movie *Titanic*. I certainly appreciate it: I saw it for the third time last night. What is the fascination here, which is leading to a world box-office record? Entertainment Weekly points out that one of the attractions is perhaps overlooked at first: it is a simple love story. It has a simple primitive appeal, the tenderness and directness of which touches peoples' hearts. Now, I heard a famous screen writer giving a lecture on his latest book the other day, pooh-poohing all this, and saying that the characters are rather superficial, that they don't develop. Aside from the fact that I thoroughly disagree, the issue is: do we have the simplicity of heart, the courage and humility of heart, to let this simple reality enter our vulnerable hearts or not?

Some will call it schmaltz, and I have sometimes been accused myself of romanticizing love, putting feeling first, saying this is what carries us through. Yet, aside from the fact, once again, that I think Rose and Jack, in the movie, work through quite a bit in a very short time with great courage, I am fully aware that love has to be worked on, to attain all the qualities that are mentioned in the second reading today, and that feelings will ebb and flow. They will perhaps mutate and be hidden for certain periods of our lives. But I think I would go so far as to say this: if you have no joy left in your life, in your relationships, none at all; if it is just drudgery; then would say, barring some extraordinary physical, or psychological, or even spiritual diagnosis, you don't have love anymore. Love should always be joy in some way and on some level. And if you don't have joy anymore, you don't have God anymore. He's there, but you're not experiencing God.

Another objection: the love between Rose and Jack was young love; it wasn't time tested. How deep could it be? Well, aside from the fact that the love was tested over time: 84 years later, according to the story line, this love was every bit as real and meaningful to the elderly Rose; aside from that, once again, are we simple and pure enough to appreciate young love as young love? Why should we scorn it? Why should we denigrate it? Are we that jaded? Are we that cynical? Are we that "mature?" One could compare it to some of the young saints, Therese of Lisieux or Aloysius Gonzaga, who died when they were twenty or twenty-two or twenty-four. Would their sainthood have withstood the test of time had they lived? We don't know that. But we can rejoice in the fact that they are saints as young people, precisely in the dimension they are meant to be.

But what leads us even deeper here is precisely the notion of duration over time. What makes the Titanic a jackpot? What makes it a huge hit is the fact of having both a love story and a disaster occurrence. It is not just that you get 2-for-1, a big wham, the two put together, as though you can choose one or the other or both. There's a very profound spiritual and psychological connection between those two elements. It's what Owen Gleibermann rightly called an epic of romantic doom: a purified yearning and dread that brings us to the deepest mythological levels of our own humanity. This puts it in the same category of doomed young love as Romeo and Juliet, Yuri and Lara, Brunnhilde and Siegfried, Tristan and Isolde. I don't mean it's as great; but the same thematic is at work here. And part of it is the all too tragic realization of the fragility and transience of the expressions and experience of our human love, which is part of what scares us.

But there's another element here. It's the fact that any love, any love over which we lose control, any love to which we surrender ourselves, any love which sweeps us away, is going to be like a death. We're going to be drowned. And that's why so many people, and so many Christians in particular, who are control freaks can't handle it, can't embrace it, can't experience it. There is a doom involved; there is a death; there is a letting go. We drown. We're buried. We're buried? What does that sound like? Christianity! We're buried, and nonetheless, the love, that current of love, that mysterious current of love operative on all levels of our life, will carry us through. As it carried that wonderful personage Jesus Christ through from death to life.

We're talking about salvation here. The experience of love, any love, is a salvific experience and equals Christian experience. The most beautiful line, to my mind, and certainly the most theological in the movie, belongs to Rose, when she says: "Jack saved me in every way that a person can be saved." He saved her physically; he saved her emotionally; he saved her socially; he saved her spiritually. For, make no mistake: I would dare say that her experience with Jack was the greatest experience of God she ever had, no matter what may or may not have been her explicit Christian allegiance to some Church later in her life. That is where the irony does become so tragic. Why do we leave this to other people? Why do we have these preconceptions and blockages and veils over our being as soon as we say we are Christians?

That's what the Gospel is talking about today. In His home town, what does Jesus find? Does He find receptivity among His people, among those who should be closest to Him? No. There were many widows in Israel, many lepers in Israel; but He revealed Himself to those who were open, to those who were vulnerable enough to have erected no shields, no barriers to their vulnerable

human heart, their simple human experience. And therefore they were more open to God's speaking to them. It shouldn't be that way, but so often it is. It's the widow of Zarephath in Sidon, it's the leper of Syria, who gets the message of God, and not his upright Christian people.

Perhaps part of the problem is that joy terrifies us. The great spiritual writer Thomas Keating pointed out that constant joy can be more exhausting than constant depression. Are we up to it? Are we up to this level of energy? For, if we are so afraid that we don't allow these energies and passions to wash over us and challenge us and energize us, it's a slap in God's face who created this in us. He says in today's reading: "I will make you a fortified city against the whole land, against its priests [indeed!] and people." God's power will carry us through. We have to believe in that and experience that.

So, let's be sexy as God is sexy. I don't mean by that going out and having sex with anyone or anything. It may not involve having sex with anyone at all. Celibates are called to this type of resonance as much as anyone. Much less does it mean going out and admiring and identifying with simply the young and beautiful by conventional human standards. On the contrary, when we plug in to this cosmic eros we can see beauty tingling everywhere. We can be energized for all sorts of love on all sorts of levels because we're plugged in. We can see beauty on the face of an old woman perhaps even more than on the face of a young woman. We see it everywhere. So let's not short-change ourselves. Let's not short-change God. If we do that, we're cheating ourselves, unnecessarily. We're cheating others, tragically. And, we're cheating God.