

Sermon for Year B Easter 6
May 21, 2006
St. Mary of the Hills, Blowing Rock, NC
The Reverend Jeanne Finan

God is love

I saw a young woman wearing a t-shirt in the Orlando airport last week.
It said:

*God loves you,
but I'm still his favorite.*

It made me laugh.

Everything is about love this morning.

It's Sunday.

There's bread and wine.

It's Third Sunday Brunch.

There are some amazing high school seniors (you made it!!!)

that we truly love

and today we celebrate their place in our hearts

and how grateful we are to call them friends,

to send them out on a new journey,

but a journey that is always wrapped in the love of God.

The reading from the Acts of the Apostles, tells us that the disciples,
even though they have just been stunned

by the brutal stoning to death of their friend Stephen,

even though they have scattered in fear,

they are still out there in Cyprus and Antioch and Tarsus
spreading the word about Jesus.

Well, no, not just spreading the word but living the word---

pooling their resources, sharing what they have,

sending relief to those who are in need.

And we also heard this morning,

...it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called "Christians."

There is something different about these followers of Jesus.

And it seems to be the way they love one another, the way they love others,
the way they love God.

This love is not just something the disciples talk about.

Others are noticing how different these disciples act—

Others are noticing the disciples are indeed willing to lay down their lives
for their friends—and they seem to define friends very, very broadly.

Others are starting to believe—to say, *Hey! I want to be like that.*

I want to abide in this love, this Jesus.”

The dominoes are starting to tumble.

Love surpasses understanding.

And I feel I have just come out of a “love-fest” of my own recently.

I spent eight days at CREDO with 30 other priests from around the country.

CREDO is a very well-planned and extremely intense conference for clergy—

long days, late nights, and some very challenging discernment--

focused time and prayer,

looking at my financial, vocational, spiritual and physical well being.

(Some of which really needs an overhaul—or at least a tune up.)

I can honestly tell you that the first night there I wanted to leave.

As I lay there in the bed, in the dark,

I thought, I can get up early and get a taxi and get back to the airport and...

Well, the good news is I fell asleep.

The next day dawned and I did not call a taxi and fly home.

I stayed.

I stayed and received the gift of abiding in the love of God all week,

I stayed and received the gift of thirty strangers becoming thirty friends.

Some of you who are graduating in a few weeks,

You might feel that way that first night or two at college.

You are so excited about getting there—

You have waited so long, worked so hard—

And then it is suddenly so terrifying being there.

Just make it through the night

and trust that you have been called to the right place.

This is the prayer we prayed all week at CREDO—

Holy God, be in my mind

that I might let go of all

that diminishes the movement of Your Spirit

within me.

Discerning God, be in my eyes,

that I might see You

in the midst of the busyness

that fills my life.

Loving God, be in my heart,
that I can be open to those I love,
to those with whom I share ministry
and to the whole human family.

Gracious God, be in that grace-filled silence
that lies deep within me,
that I might live in Christ
as Christ lives in me.
Amen.

It's a wonderful prayer.
And not just for clergy.
God is at work, calling us all,
longing for us
just as we long for God.

I left CREDO and immediately went to a reunion
with my 7 closest friends from Seminary.
We gather once a year for a time of retreat and reflection—
and most of all, to just be with one another because we love each other.
And the question we talked about this year was this:
So how are you doing with your ordination vows?
How am I doing with what I stood before all of you and promised I would do?

There are two things I read in the Book of Common Prayer every morning.
I read my ordination vows and I read the baptismal covenant.
That is how I open my prayer time each morning.
Remembering that I am so called to this life as a priest.
Remembering that I am marked as Christ's own forever by my baptism.

God calls each of us in different ways.
The differences don't matter.
The love is what matters.
It is important to listen so we can call back.

Marianne Ell, a priest from North Dakota, was one of our chaplains at CREDO.
Marianne serves at a small church and also as the chaplain at the local hospital.
She lives on a 400 acre ranch with her husband and her daughter
and lots and lots of cows,
Marianne shared with us how a mother cow will bellow for her calf if they are separated.
I'm sure many of you have heard that.
The mother cow bellows--
And the calf hears its mother calling and bellows back.

And then, bellowing all the way, they keep moving until they find each other once more.
God is like that.

Bellowing out for us in both the darkest and the brightest times of our lives.

But we need to remember to listen,

And to bellow back.

Because you see it is all about love.

It is about how much God loves us.

It is about how much we long to love God.

It is not about a rigid set of beliefs.

God is not a tit-for-tat deal maker.

God's love is free, God's love is abundant,

God's love is given to everyone.

Everyone.

No one is anonymous when it comes to God's love.

And no one is dispensible or irredeemable.

Perfection is never required.

Not to God.

It's about love.

One night at CREDO we prayed the beautiful service of Night Prayers

From the New Zealand Prayer book.

When we left the chapel it was dark, the air was heavy with the smell of jasmine,

It was dreamy.

And as I walked back to the dorm,

I heard an owl calling.

I thought.

You know it just doesn't get better than this.

Night prayers. New friends. Jasmine. And now an owl.

But as I rounded the bend on the path I realized it wasn't an owl at all.

It was an "Earl".

It was one of the other priests—a fellow named Earl—and he had stopped in miid-path

And was hooting up into the night sky.

And it was so beautiful.

It was such a moment of absolute joy.

In reality Earl is a white haired priest in his sixties, almost ready for retirement.

But at that moment, he just looked like a little boy to me.

A little boy who loved the forest, loved the wild creatures—

loved them all enough to call out to them,

doing his best to speak their language—with great love.

Okay, so it wasn't a real owl. It was still an amazing moment of pure joy.

I continued along the path, listening to Earl as he continued to persistently hoot.

Pause. Hoot again.

And then, moments later, from the tip top of a pine tree,
 came the call back from an owl, a real owl, hooting back to Earl.
Earl and the owl hooted back and forth to one another
 and the rest of us just stopped, wherever we were on the path in the dark,
 we just stopped and stood in the stillness
 and took it all in.

How important it is to listen for God calling to us.
How important it is for us to call out to God.
How important it is to patient.
How beautiful it is to know that God is always there,
 always waiting for our call,
 always ready and eager to call back.

God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.
It just doesn't get any better than that.

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