

“Love, Lover, Loved”

May 22, 2016

Rev. Eric S. Corbin

First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois

### **John 16:12-15**

In my seminary career, the course that I liked the *least* was a course on St. Augustine of Hippo. The course description was “A study of the life and thought of St. Augustine, including a reading of selections from the *Confessions* and the *City of God*.” The course was fairly early in my seminary career and it really was a struggle for me. My college degree was in Engineering Technology and I had spent several years working with computers and technology. Since I accepted my call to ordained ministry well after college, I had taken only one Philosophy class in college and had no formal religion classes. Studying Augustine was a challenge for me, as I was in the process of switching from a primarily left-brained way of thinking to more of a right-brained way of thinking. Though I got my worst grade ever in this class, I do remember one thing very clearly. The professor stated that Augustine had more influence on Western thinking than probably any other theologian. I didn’t really want to believe that, as I was struggling to understand what it was that Augustine was saying! Part of that is the issue of the language used, as Augustine wrote in very formal Latin, which has been translated into English. Let me give you an example of what I mean. Here is a *very* small part of what Augustine had to say about the Trinity: “it is true that the Father has a Son, and yet is not Himself the Son; and the Son has a Father, and is not Himself the Father. But, as regards Himself, irrespective of relation to the other, each is what He has; thus, He is in Himself living, for He has life, and is Himself the Life which He has.”

Now, if you parse those words carefully, *eventually*, it makes sense. But it takes a while to get there, especially for a left-brained person like me. And so, I tried to set Augustine aside after that class. And yet, I discover again and again that my professor was right – Augustinian thought was indeed enormously influential on our thought, especially when it comes to the Trinity. I just can’t get away from St. Augustine! Perhaps it is something like my call to ministry – always there, inescapable, just waiting for my surrender. I think the Trinity – sometimes known as the Godhead – is the same way. In the end, we cannot escape the love of our God, known to us in three persons.

The topic of today’s sermon is the Holy Trinity. It is the concept of God in three persons. It is complex and it is confusing. But I am comforted to know that a brilliant thinker like Augustine struggled just as much as I do.

One day, Augustine was puzzling over the doctrine of the Trinity while walking along the beach. He saw a young boy with a bucket, running back and forth to pour water into a little hole. Augustine asked, “What are you doing?” The boy replied, “I’m trying to put the ocean into this hole.” And it was then that Augustine realized that he had been trying to put an infinite God into his finite mind.

Thus, we return to the topic of mystery that we discussed several months ago, remembering that a God that we can fully understand is no God at all. I return to the quote from theologian Justo Gonzalez: “Trinity is a mystery, not a puzzle. You try to solve the puzzle, you stand in awe before a mystery.”

And so, we stand in awe before the mystery of God. Augustine himself wrote about the Trinity in fifteen books. In one of those, he used this concept: in addition to thinking about the Trinity in terms such as the traditional Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, or other understandings like Creator,

Redeemer, and Sustainer, we can also think of the Trinity as “the Lover,” “the Loved,” and “the Love that unites the Lover and the Loved.” The scriptures affirm that God *is* love. And if God is love itself, then God also *loves*. And if God is revealed to us as three-in-one, then it makes sense that the three persons in the Trinity love one another with the holy and pure love that is God. God is love, God is one who loves, and God is one who is loved. God models for us the relationship that desired from us. We are to be in unity with one another and with God. We are to model God’s love by loving one another, by being loved, by loving God, and by being loved by God. We are to be in relationship with one another and with God.

The author and preacher Len Sweet says that we can look at God as a kind of *love triangle*. Not the negative kind of love triangle we hear about, not a kind of triangulated love that pits people against one another, but a kind of love that is experienced relationally through the three persons of the Trinity, through the Lover, Loved, and Love. This love triangle can be used just as navigators have always used three points to find their position. Sailors can measure the angle formed between them and two known points and calculate where they are. They can use that information to safely navigate unknown areas. We find our place in relation to the love triangle of God and we discover that we are right in the middle of God’s love. We can safely navigate through our days knowing that we are securely located in God’s love.

We will never know all that there is to know about any situation. There will always be unknowns, but we can navigate them safely by living in the midst of God’s love. Jesus told the Disciples in today’s Gospel lesson, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.” Even those who were with Jesus for his earthly ministry could not bear to hear everything that Jesus had to tell them. They could not absorb everything that Jesus had to share with them, but Jesus told them that was OK. The Holy Spirit would be around to guide them. Jesus tells them that “all that the Father has” is Jesus’, too. And the Holy Spirit will be there to declare these things to the disciples. The Message paraphrases part of this as the Spirit “will make sense out of what is about to happen and, indeed, out of all that I have done and said.” Again, we are in the center of God’s love, as what is God the Father’s is also Jesus’ and they rely on the Spirit to help us understand. We use that triangle of love and our location right in the center of it to understand what we need to know of the world around us. We are included in the divine knowledge of God the Father and God the Son, through the inspiration of God the Spirit. And if we are included in the divine love triangle, then we are expected to participate in the love of God. Jesus actually gave us a very specific instruction about that in John 13. Jesus said “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

There’s a story of a church that had a Lenten theme of “The Hard Sayings of Jesus.” Each week, one or more of the difficult teachings of Jesus was explored and explained. Sayings such as “Turn the other cheek.” And “Love your enemies.” And “Walk the second mile.” And “Pray for those who persecute you.”

One student said, “These teachings of Jesus are difficult for me. I’m not sure I understand them.”

Another person said, “I see it just the other way around. They are difficult for me because I think I DO understand them . . . I’m just not sure I want to DO them.”

Jesus told us to love as He loves us. And I think we DO understand that. I think we just aren’t always sure we want to DO that. Of course, the difficult part about that is the “Just as I have loved you” part. We are to love each other in the same way that Jesus loves us. And Jesus loves us in the same way that all three parts of the Trinity love one another. It is a love which has no

ends, a love which knows no bounds, and the love which we have for one another and for God is a reflection of that love, thus it also should have no bounds. We – all of us, together – are part of the Lover, Loved, and Love. God’s love is poured into our very hearts through the Holy Spirit. The love of God surrounds us and envelops us, and it must also flow through us into others. We locate ourselves in the midst of God’s love, a love that comes to us as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. It comes to us as Father, Son, and Spirit. And knowing that we are right in the middle of the love of our God, we can safely navigate our lives, loving as we are loved. Amen.