

Stretching Toward Sunday

Thoughts, readings and reflections
based on this week's lectionary readings

May 2, 2021

Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year B

The readings this week:

- Acts 8:26-40 ◦ Psalm 22:25-31
- 1 John 4:7-21 ◦ John 15:1-8



[Click here to read this week's Scriptures](#)

Swaddled and Squinting

I have very clear memories of holding each of my daughters, just moments after their births. Both times a nurse handed me those little swaddled bundles and then left the room to care for my wife, just recovering from the c-section.

I remember experiencing a flood of emotion, and an overwhelming sense of wonder. Looking into their little squinting eyes, and running my fingers through their little whisps of hair, I was convinced that I'd never love anyone else ever as much.

But, why? Why did I love them so much then? They hadn't done anything yet. They hadn't even eaten, or had reason for a diaper change. They hadn't accomplished some great feat, and they hadn't done anything for me at all.

They hadn't even fetched the remote control for me.

But, I didn't love them because of what they had done, or what they could do. I loved them for who they were: they were mine. My children. An in those moments, and every moment since, I have loved them. On days when they make me proud. On days when they get on my last nerve. On every day in-between.

Becoming a daddy has helped me get a glimpse into the love of God that I might never had gotten otherwise. Not that there aren't other ways to glimpse God's love—but for me, personally, it changed everything.

As I held those little bundles of joy in my arms and felt the rush of awe and wonder, so must God experience when he holds us. God doesn't love us because we do things for Him. God doesn't love us because of our great feats and accomplishments. God doesn't love us because we're good.

God loves us, because we are His. On days when we make Him proud, on days when we get on His every last nerve, on days we fail to live up to even the most basic Christian expectations.

He loves us still. Despite it all. Through it all.

We are His.

In 1st John, we are rightly told that God doesn't love us because we love God. God loved us first. He was the first lover.

It's the response to that gushing love that is meant to spring up in us the power to love in return. How can we not love the God who made us, redeemed us, and who loves us?

It's why God wants to give us eternal life—so that we can abide with Him forever. We were meant to live in the Garden of Eden with God forevermore, with the Tree of Life bearing the fruit that would make that possible. Of course, that didn't work out as planned. But, then, in order to make that dream a reality again, God sent His Son. To live among us, as one of us.

To die as one of us.

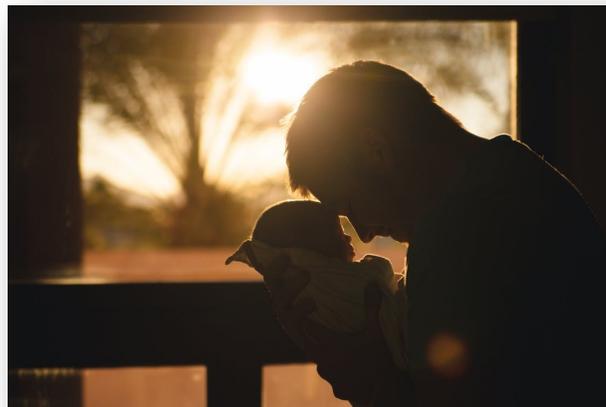
How much did God in Christ love us? That much.

Because when we are swaddled in His arms, and God looks into our squinting eyes, all He sees is love.

Which is why it bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things.

Love. Never. Fails.

~ Rick Morley, [a garden path](#)



Reflecting on the Word



___ 1st Reading: [Acts 8:26-40](#)

Is evangelism a task for certain believers, or for all Christians? Do you think it might be significant that the Spirit did not directly tell Philip what he would be doing on the road to Gaza? What clues do we have from this passage that the man was already interested in the Jewish faith? Why is this fact important to the story? Given his past experiences, why is it not surprising that Philip would receive this kind of mission from the Spirit? Why is it significant that this man was reading this particular passage from Isaiah when he encountered Philip? Why do you think God took Philip away immediately after the man was baptized? Why not allow Philip to stay and teach him more? Why do you think the early Jewish Christians had such a hard time allowing the Gospel to spread to other kinds of people? What kinds of people do today's Christians sometimes think are beyond the Gospel's reach? Do you think Philip was a special kind of person? Or is this something any of us can do? What kinds of reasons do we use to excuse ourselves from sharing the Gospel with others? [Faith Element](#)

___ Psalm Reading: [Psalm 22:25-31](#)

What do David's comments in verses 19-21 reveal about David's personal relationship with God? Considering how David began in verse 1, how did he arrive at his praise in verse 22 and his comfort in verse 24? Notice that David shifts his attention to God and others in verse 23. What does he instruct? Why would he do this? Why is it important for someone in the midst of struggle to still be altruistic (other-focused)? Psalm 22 ends remarkably different than it began. What details in verses 25-31 seem to contrast with the first half of the psalm? Why do you think the follower of God can experience such extremes of faith and emotion during their life? In verse 31, what is it that the Lord "has done"? What do verses 30-31 suggest about God's plan for passing on faith and leadership in the midst of struggle? [Ken Castor](#)

Praying Toward Sunday

The vine emerges from the earth,
nourished
and nourishing.

Rises without visible connection;
roots hidden,
promise unknown.

Strong to withstand storms,
fragile when plucked too soon.

So it is that we grow...
nourished by invisible connections to the living
God,
called to nourish that which is seen and that which
is yet buried within.

~ Katherine Hawker, [Liturgy Outside](#)

You, then, are my workers. You have come from me, the supreme eternal gardener, and I have engrafted you onto the vine by making myself one with you.

Keep in mind that each of you has your own vineyard. But everyone is joined to the neighbors' vineyards without any dividing lines. They are so joined together, in fact, that you cannot do good or evil for yourself without doing the same for your neighbors.

~ Catherine of Siena 1347-1380 Dialogue, The Vines That Are Tended by the Divine Gardener (quoted from Mystics Visionaries and Prophets, Shawn Madigan, CSJ, editor), via Suzanne Guthrie, [At the Edge of Enclosure](#)

___ 3rd Reading: [1 John 4:7-21](#)

Do you think we can be afraid to love sometimes – whether emotionally or in action? When and why? What is the source of all love, according to the writer? How did God ultimately demonstrate that love? Take a few moments to unpack the well-known statement, “God is love”. What does this mean... and what does it mean for us? When we have difficulty loving someone, or difficulty trusting God, how can it help to remember that all love began with God. What is to be our reason and motivation for loving other people? How might this change the way we choose to show love? What danger do we face from loving others? What kinds of things could happen if we act in unconditional love to others? If we give perfect love, how can we banish our fear of being hurt? How is our love an extension and a completion of God's love? Does this mean that God's love is incomplete unless we participate? [Faith Element](#)

___ 4th Reading: [John 15:1-8](#)

Jesus picks up the extended agricultural metaphor of the vine and branches bearing fruit in this passage. This image is used throughout Scripture, often to describe the people of God, as seen in Psalm 80:8-19 and Isaiah 5:1-5. Jesus takes the image a slightly different direction here. What does he say the vine, branches, and gardener represent? What do you think Jesus mean by ‘bearing fruit’ in this passage? Would you describe yourself as someone who bears fruit for God? Jesus emphasizes love when He says, “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love.” What do you think this means? What sort of love is Jesus talking about? How have you cultivated the life of remaining or abiding in Christ? Are there specific spiritual practices that help you with this? Jesus offers some very specific requests near the end of this passage. How do you think this call to action connects with the call to remain in love? [Renovate](#)