

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

May 9, 2021 — 6TH SUNDAY OF EASTER (YR. B) / ROGATION SUNDAY / MOTHER'S DAY

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: "Love is Part of the Answer"

First Lesson	Acts 10:44-48	(God gives His Holy Spirit to all who believe, even the Gentiles)
Psalter	Psalm 98	(Sing to the Lord a new song, praising His faithfulness and righteousness)
Second Lesson	1 John 5:1-6	(When believers in Christ love others, we show that we are God's children)
Gospel	St. John 15:9-17	(Jesus teaches that we are to love each other as He loves us)

This morning we are presented with three themes from which to choose:

According to the secular calendar, today is Mother's Day, a celebration honoring mothers and motherhood, maternal bonds, and the influence of mothers in society. Good material for a sermon about Jesus' mother, the Blessed Virgin Mary, or about the motherly love of God for His children, about which we read in Scripture.

Liturgically, this is the sixth Sunday in Eastertide, a season in which we continue to celebrate the joy and hope that are ours through the Resurrection of Christ from the dead. We could always talk more about that astounding miracle, and the exciting promise of eternal life.

In Anglican tradition, today is Rogation Sunday, a time of celebration and prayer set aside for us to recognize and appreciate our dependence upon the land for our food, and most importantly, our dependence on God for the miracles of sprouting seeds, growing plants, and a maturing harvest.¹

The word "Rogation" comes from the Latin verb *rogare*, meaning "to ask." It was applied to this Sunday and the three weekdays that follow, because originally the previous Sunday's Gospel included the phrase, "Ask and ye shall receive," from John 16:24. Typically, faithful Christians observed Rogation days by fasting, in preparation for the Feast of the Ascension—which we will observe here at St. John's on Sunday, May 16th. Often, during Rogation days, farmers had their crops blessed by a priest. Another common feature of Rogation days in former times was the ceremony of "beating the bounds," in which parishioners, led by the priest, church warden, and choir processed around the boundaries of their parish, praying for its protection in the forthcoming year.²

Last, but not least, today's Lectionary offers us two lessons on love. The Gospel gives us our Lord Jesus' commandment to love one another as He loves us; and in today's Epistle, St. John declares that our love for God dictates that we also love His children. Last Sunday's lesson opened with 1 John 4:7, which is engraved inside Rick's and my wedding rings. It references the text: "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God."

Since this coming Friday is our 27th wedding anniversary, and love is on my mind, and in my heart, I could also preach about marriage, and the importance of long-term faithfulness and frequent forgiveness. As crowded as today's secular, liturgical, and traditional calendar is, let us see how the "love theme" that dominates our Lectionary can be tied to these other topics.

First, the primary human love that any of us encounters is from the mother who gives us birth. If we are fortunate, our mothers care for and nurture us throughout our childhood in ways that communicate love, respect, and encouragement. This is certainly consistent with the Gospel.

Second, from the ideal of motherly love, we learn that is how we ought to treat the natural world, loving our unique planet earth with its incredible beauty and magnificent abundance. Historically, Christians have not greatly emphasized stewardship of *Creation*. We were suspicious of mixing faith and fields, because we knew that pagans and wiccans worship nature. "Going green" seemed better left to secular ecologists or hippies. What we forgot is how much of the Old Testament is devoted to the proper care of nature, and ecologically-beneficial farming.

Also, we seem to conveniently overlook how many of Jesus' parables have to do with vines, branches, sowers, seeds, fields, farm animals, sheep, birds, plants, fruit, and flowers. So, it really is okay for Christians to love, respect, and encourage God's gift of the natural world, by seeking to care for it in wise and productive ways.

Turning to our Epistle lesson, verses 1-4, we read in The New Living Translation: "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has become a child of God. And everyone who loves the Father loves his children, too. We know we love God's children if we love God and obey his commandments. Loving God means keeping his commandments, and his commandments are not burdensome. For every child of God defeats this evil world, and we achieve this victory through our faith."

Yes, we can defeat this evil world through our faith because—and *only* because—Jesus Christ already defeated the powers of evil, death, and hell, through His death and resurrection, which, of course, we are celebrating during this Eastertide.

Now, we can see how keeping God's commandments would show God that we love Him. But we might not immediately connect faithfulness to God's commandments with *loving God's people*. Yet, upon further reflection, we realize that if we obey God's commandments to honor our parents; shun adultery; refrain from murdering anyone; refuse to lie or bear false witness; and reject envying or stealing what others have, we *will be* showing love to our family members, neighbors, and friends.

The love for God and others that leads us to follow God's commandments was expanded by St. Paul in his classic definition of Christian love as a whole: Such love is "patient and kind; [it] does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends" (1 Corinthians 13:1-8a) Of course, this is the kind of love with which Christ has loved *us*, and the kind of love He calls us to offer one another.

Over and over in church, we hear, "love one another." But sometimes that's easier said than done. We hope for warm, kindly feelings. But true, godly love does not depend on our fleeting, volatile emotions. We don't even have to like the other person, because "like" presumes a certain sympathetic bond, and values and interests held in common. This may not always be the case.

To genuinely love another person—whether friend, family, neighbor, stranger, or enemy—means, above all, we wish that individual no harm, we want them to know Jesus, and we are willing to pray for them. Disciplining ourselves to pray for someone we can't stand is always a good beginning, because out of the empathy and humility that God places in our hearts when such a practice is maintained over time, true compassion and kindness can grow.

Christian love is also "tough love." It doesn't entail being a door mat for anyone, or allowing those we love to behave in ways that may hurt themselves or others. And it does not mean tolerating that which is morally wrong. Godly love requires that we be accountable to God and to each other, as we place God and one another ahead of our own selfish will and priorities.

Thankfully, we are not alone in our struggle to love others: First, we have God's love within us, as a well from which to draw, when our human capacity to love is low. St. Paul writes in Romans 5:5 (NIV), "God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us."

Second, we have our faith that carries us through seemingly loveless times. That's because, as Christians, our faith, like seeds, is rooted and grounded in the Love of Christ. In St. Paul's prayer for the Ephesians (3:16-19), he writes, "I pray that ... [God] may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power ... to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge —that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."

Here, St. Paul uses two metaphors, the first, taken from agriculture. Like trees, we are to be *rooted* in love—this is the soil in which our souls will grow. Deep down, into the infinite love of God, by faith our souls sink their roots, and from this love derive all the nourishment that is essential for our full *growth*.

What do you know? Our Rogation theme has returned! This growth results in our having more and more the heart and mind of Jesus, or, as Paul says, we become “filled with all the fullness of God.”

So what are the benefits of loving one another? First John 4:18 tells us, “There is no fear in love. But love that is complete drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears has not become completely loving.” When someone genuinely loves us, we no longer fear they might hurt us, or that we are not good enough. A true love relationship is not fraught with anxiety. And in 1 Peter 4:8, we read, “Above all, love each other warmly, because love covers many sins.” That is, Christian love is always forgiving—and also tries hard to forget—both of which may take time and dedicated effort.

It’s become cliché to say, “Love is the answer!” But love is only part of the answer. We also need faith, patience, understanding, compassion, courage, endurance, and a sense of humor, in order to fully love one another. But thankfully, we know from last Sunday’s Gospel that Jesus promises if we abide in Him, if we allow Him to make His home in our hearts, we will receive all these things, and be empowered to live in love, both toward God and others. And let’s not forget that today’s Epistle reminds us that keeping the 10 Commandments is another good tool for loving others.

May God, the Creator of heaven and earth, and the beauty and bounty of both; may the Holy Spirit, who loves us unconditionally like an adoring mother; and may our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us and rose again that we might have new and eternal life, hold you close this day, and in the days ahead may you rejoice fully in His great love for you. *Amen*.

¹ Adapt. “Rogation Sunday,” [Northwest Synod of Wisconsin Resource Center](http://www.synodresourcecenter.org/wma/worship/occasional/other/0015/rogation_sunday.html), Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, © 2002 <http://www.synodresourcecenter.org/wma/worship/occasional/other/0015/rogation_sunday.html> 9 May 2012. Used with permission.

² Adapt. “Rogation Days” [Wikipedia.org](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rogation_days), 26 April 2012 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rogation_days> 9 May 2012. Used with permission.