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Sixth Sunday of Easter  
Sunday Readings for May 13, 2012 for Cycle B:  
Acts 10:25-48; Ps 98; 1 Jn 4:7-10; Jn 15:9-17

THE STRENGTH OF LOVE AND FORGIVENESS

Lawrence E. Frizzell

A century and more ago certain philosophers claimed that Jewish and Christian hope for the Kingdom of God and the work of the Messiah was the simplistic expectation of people who did not give humankind its due. These dreams of believers were tied to a doctrine of mercy and love that sapped humanity of the strength to forge ahead to new levels of maturity. The beatitudes of Jesus (Mt 5:3-12) were said to constitute a slave morality, which should be replaced by fortitude. Courage, not love, must be the fundamental virtue of "man come of age". The Nazis used this thinking to promote their odious vision of society.

The Church, however, continues to proclaim that to give is better than to receive (Acts 20:35), that to exploit, crush or destroy other human beings or the earth itself in the name of "progress" is criminal. She presents the mystery of Christ's passion and resurrection as the great sign that love and truth will be victorious. The greatest fortitude in life's crucible is shown by the victims of another's attempt to create a society devoid of love and forgiveness.

The fourth evangelist must have reflected over many decades on the work of Jesus and the origins of his commandment for his followers to love one another. Long before, the biblical tradition had presented the challenge to imitate God (Lev 19:2) as the fundamental principle to guide observance of the commandments. To imitate God presupposes an intimate knowledge or experience of the divine mystery. Thus God revealed the divine Name to Moses in the burning bush (Ex 3:13-15) and more fully on the top of Mount Sinai. “The Lord is a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness... forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin but by no means clearing the guilty..." (Ex 34:6-7). John recognized that these attributes are but facets of one fundamental truth: "God is love.” This love was manifested fully in Christ: "God sent his only Son into the world so that we might have love through him" (4:9).

God revealed his love in many ways, especially by rescuing the Hebrew people from slavery. The greatest sign of the Father's love was manifested when he sent his Son to deliver all humanity from its enslavement to sin. Jesus taught his followers to imitate his service of the heavenly Father and elevated them to the intimacy of friendship with him. This was achieved at the cost of his own life. “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends” (15:13). Was this perhaps one of the understatements that John delighted to present? In any case, St. Paul marveled that Christ died for the impious, to make them his friends (Rom 5:6-9).
Only by God's gracious gift of the Covenant can anyone respond consistently to the new commandment. "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (Jn 15:12, see 13:34-35). The model for mutual love in the Church is the way that Jesus showed obedience to the Father and love to the uttermost for his own (13:1). For anyone to lay down his or her life for friends is the ideal of sacrificial love that is also the highest expression of faith and courage. Frequently inscribed on memorials to the war dead of many European nations (often tragically in conflict with each other), this passage applies above all to martyrs for the faith, and to medical personnel lose their lives in the service of their patients.

The new commandment must find expression, not only in the death of heroes and heroines, but in the fabric of our very ordinary lives. Like Peter, we must recognize the work of God in the lives of people from all nations and reach out to them to continue the building of the Church. "May they all be one, even as you, Father, are in me and I in you... so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (Jn 17:21). This is the foundation for a new world order that will replace the ideologies of exclusion and hatred that are spawned by the idolatry implicit in all efforts to extoll state or race. "God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:35).