

7 Epiphany A 2017

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18

Psalm 119:33-40

1 Corinthians 3:1-10, 16-23

Matthew 5:38-48

Love actually

Is what it's all about.

No, not the movie,
Or the mini-sequel that's on its way,
Setting hearts a flutter
Or lips curling in a sneer
Or heads wagging in disapproval.
A collective breath
Held in anticipation.
Still, not the movie.

Love actually

Is the foundation

Of all that Moses tells God's people
In the Holiness Code of the first lesson
And all Jesus tells his followers
In the Sermon on the Mount of the gospel passage.

Love is the foundation.

Without it,

As today's collect tells us,
Whatever we do is worth nothing.

Be holy, says God through Moses.

As I, God, am holy,

So you shall be holy.

Be perfect, says Jesus,

As God is perfect.

Love actually

Is the only way

We can even imagine our way
Towards that holiness and perfection.

Without love,

They would be worth nothing.

Not, actually,
That we are in much danger of achieving them.

But if we even try to understand
The holiness and perfection
To which we are called
As something separate from love,
Then we're on the wrong track.

Be holy.
Be perfect.
Be like God.
Be love.

At this point,
It might be tempting to say,
Be serious.
We can't really be called
To be those things.

But this time Jesus is serious,
I believe.

Be complete, be fulfilled,
Be perfect as God is perfect.
Be the embodiment of love,
Completely filled to overflowing
With the God who is known as love.

This is one of those moments
When we have to choose
How to confront
What we believe is impossible.

We know we're not that holy.
We don't even like the word much.

We usually remember we're not perfect,
But we're often in love with the concept,
Whether we admit it or not.

We know we're not God,
Even though we try to be like God
In unhelpful ways,
Without recognizing it soon enough,
Or often enough.

But we do know something about love,
Actually.
That greatest of mysteries.

Without it,
Whatever we do is worth nothing.

No pursuit of justice,
No restraint,
No offering,
Is worth anything
Unless it is founded on love.

So where does that leave us?
How do we act in love,
In this time that has come upon us?

Love is made know in action,
In simple, ordinary action
And in grand, dramatic acts.

But we are not perfect,
And sometimes love slips out of our grasp,
And then action,
Even if it is effective,
Loses its worth.

We are not holy,
so love withers
And action warps.

Where does that leave us?
How do we hold on to love,
So that our actions
Are worth something?

For me, in this moment,
It means stepping back a pace,
Taking a breath,
And settling my feet back down
On the foundation of love.

The love that is known in community,
In relationship,
In solitary silence.

That's why we gather for worship.
That's why we pray.
That's why we continue to read
The difficult,
Confounding,
Bewildering words of scripture
As well as the splendid,
Inspiring,
Comforting words.

When I started reading
These difficult words this week –
Turn the other cheek,
Go the extra mile,
Give away your cloak –
Many things happened all at once.

I remembered the pictures in my Sunday school books,
Of a craven, small, meek looking man,
Handing over his cloak
To a big strapping Roman soldier.
I recognized how the illustrator,
And my teachers,
Had dutifully repeated and depicted what Jesus said
While suggesting that no one really wanted to do
What Jesus said.

I watched how quickly I went,
In my own reflections,
To a clear and satisfying interpretation
That cast me as the righteous one
In our current political drama.
I was sure I knew,
Right away,
Who was understanding the Holiness Code
And the greater righteousness
Of the Sermon on the Mount,
And who was in flagrant,
Deliberate,
Misguided and cruel violation.

I was loving those who loved me
And hating my enemies,
All in the name of righteousness.

Then, I heard,

Through my own noise,
And the noise around me,
The voice of Jesus, saying
The sun shines on everyone,
And the rain falls on every single person.

Think of your least favorite person.
The sheer, overwhelming
Abundant love of God
Is streaming down on that person,
More powerful than the sun.

Think of someone you know is wrong.
The gracious, forgiving,
Accepting love of God
Is pouring down on that person,
As welcome as the rain.

Without that kind of love,
Our actions are empty.

With that love,
Our actions
Are the occasion for God to work in the world.

Turning the other cheek,
Going the extra mile,
Giving and sharing and lending freely,
These look like weakness
In a world that values force
And mistakes it for power.

But these actions Jesus offers us
Are signs of love.
If they were anything else,
They would be worth nothing.

Turning the other cheek,
Going the extra mile,
Are the actions of those
Who let God go to work through them.
Those who let God
Make them agents of reconciliation.

In these times,
We will be called to act in different ways.

Some of us will be called
Into open and honest conversation
With those who see things very differently.
We will be called to see the sun
Shining on them
As the sun shines on us.

Without that sure and certain knowledge,
That the sun of God's love
Shines on them,
The speaking and listening
Is worth nothing.

Some of us will be called to act
As agents of God's fierce justice.
But even this work
Happens in the knowledge
That those whom we engage in bitter struggle
Also stand under the pouring rain
Of God's love.

Without that,
The struggle for justice
Is worth nothing.

Some of us,
Who see good things happening
In the present moment,
Or who are drawn sometimes one way,
And sometimes another,
Some of us who walk the middle way
Will be called
To speak our truth.

Some of us will be called
To proclaim a truth
That is hard for others to hear.
When that happens,
We may need to remind each other
That the sun shines on each of us,
And the rain pours down,
Making each of us grow
In some way
That may remain hidden
Maybe for now,
Maybe forever.

We are called
To speak the truth –
In love.

We are called to be in love
As we approach the world.

We are called to be open
To the complete,
Fully realized,
All-sufficient –
In other words, perfect –
Love of God.

Not only to be open to it,
But to accept it,
Unearned,
Without reservations –
Unconditional.

Not only to accept it,
But to see through its ears
Hear with its eyes.

To read or watch or listen to the news
With the eyes and ears of love.
To act in love.
To refrain from acting,
Out of love.
To speak in love.

That's holiness.
That's perfection.
That's love, actually.

If we could do this,
Be utterly suffused with complete,
All-sufficient,
Impartial
And abundant love,
We would be perfect,
As God is perfect.

We're not there.
But that's the vision

Jesus holds out to us,
The vision of love
Without which even the greater righteousness he teaches
Is worth nothing.

We're not there.
But we can set ourselves on the journey,
If we trust the vision.

While we are fumbling around,
Sometimes trying,
Sometimes resisting,
Sometimes giving up,
And then getting up and trying again,
While we are fumbling around,
That love is shining on us
And around us
And even,
Believe it or not,
Through us.

We hold the vision,
While we stumble along the way.

The ultimate goal is already with us
And so we know how to begin.