

Sermon – March 4, 2024 – Lent 4 – Pastor Ventura

True Love John 3:14–21

Dear Friends in Christ.

Grace and peace from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Our Gospel reading this morning tell us that God so loves the world. If he loves so the world, then love is a wonderful gift God gives. Love is something we human beings desire. We want to feel the warmth, security, and tenderness that comes from being loved or being in love. We want to be loved by our parents, our spouse, our children, our friends, and our coworkers.

The operative word this morning is “love” – a word that’s become so tortured and twisted in our day and time that the chances of recognizing it comes from God for it is how God loves us is almost non-existent. The reason is because we so often confuse love with lust, fond feelings, and warm “fuzzies.” We speak of “falling in love,” as if it implied a loss of control. We talk about “making love,” but rarely as that sacred, holy activity reserved by God for a husband and wife bound together in marriage. And sadly, most of the time we’re slow to heed Christ’s admonition that we are love one another as he loved us.

I fear we’ve forgotten what it was that drew the pagans into the Church very early on. It certainly wasn’t their impressive buildings – for the Early Church didn’t have any. Nor was it their splendid liturgies, their teaching, or their outreach programs. It was quite simply the love they had for one another – how master and slave alike treated each other differently because they were Christians – how brothers and sisters could be reconciled one to the other – how husbands and wives lived in peace – and how a group of people who had very little in common joined together in love – for no other reason than that they were loved by Christ!

But we all enjoy a good love story don’t we. We forget what true love is, but we still love a good love story whatever that looks like, and when we hear of a love story, we feel good inside. But there is a love story, in fact the only true love story that the

Gospel tells of this morning: the unconditional love that God the Father has shown to us through his only-begotten Son! “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (v 16).

Oftentimes we think of love as an emotion, a good feeling, or sweet words.

There’s nothing wrong with those things, and they certainly can be a legitimate part of love. Yet at some point, if love is to be true love, it must be willing to be more than just words. True love needs to be willing to become tangible.

Sure, it’s easy to love that cute little baby or that little puppy in the window. But what about loving the unlovable? When was the last time you were confronted by a filthy homeless person, a pesky drug addict, someone you totally disagree with, or one of your enemies—and showed them true and true Christian love?

The opportunities for us to show love are not just circumstantial. Genuine true love is found in the people that God has intentionally put into our lives, that he has asked us to care for. God’s unconditional love now sets our agenda, guides our decisions, and determines our actions through the same kind of true love that he has first shown to us.

I want to remind you that most of the time true love is hard work. Love is not romantic comedies, Hallmark cards, flowers, and Hershey’s chocolate kisses, or to be shown just on every February 14th.

Genuine love does not always make us feel warm and fuzzy inside. Oftentimes, true love means rolling up our sleeves and giving up all that we have. It is important to note that when we give up our life in service to love others, does not make it to be the end of our life. It is, rather, the beginning of a new life. A genuine life focused on and centered in Christ and the love he wants to share.

True love sometimes means saying, “I was wrong, and I am sorry.” Sometimes genuine love means that you love your neighbor enough to call them out on their sins and hold them accountable, reminding them that they, too, need to repent. True love

does not mean condone evil or bad behavior, true love means seeking someone else's welfare and ultimately salvation.

Not only is this kind of love hard work, but it can also be painful work. True love sometimes includes sleepless nights and uncontrolled anguish. How painful is it when your love is not returned?

Friends, this is where the rubber meets the road. This is when you find out what genuine and true is all about. For it is at those times when love is more than an emotion. It is an action. An action that requires you to give up yourself for the sake of others.

So, what does love have to do with Lent? Everything! God's love for humanity became tangible in the actions of the life, death, and resurrection of his only-begotten Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. This intimate, unconditional, true love that Jesus has for us is at the heart of Lent.

Today, we are inching closer to the day when Jesus shows the ultimate genuine and true love by dying on the cross to save us from our sins.

I am sure you are familiar with John 3:16, but do you know John 3:17? "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." You see, no greater and true love can be expressed than what Jesus did for us. Jesus has not been sent into the world to condemn it. No, he has been sent to save the world; and it is only through Jesus that we can truly know what this true love looks like.

Christ has shown the true genuine love for you and me by fully giving himself up for us and to us. Jesus has not only given us his love, but he has also given us all that he is, in his very body and blood shed for us, on this very altar. He has given us all that he has and all that he is, so that we may love one another as he has first loved us.

Today, out of genuine love, Christ makes us his very own. That is the kind of genuine love we see in the waters of Holy Baptism, a love that is rich in grace and full of forgiveness. It is our Epistle for today: "But God, being rich in mercy, because of the

great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved” (Eph 2:4–5).

This love that our heavenly Father has for us did not come easy. His love for us cost him a great deal. It cost him his only Son. It is in the triune God that we see the fulfillment of what true love looks like.

In God the Father, we see a true love that is modeled by Christ and his Bride, the Church. In God the Son, we see a true love that spreads out his arms and dies for us. In God the Holy Spirit, we see a true love that does not let us live apart from God but calls us back home into his holy house.

But just as true God’s love is, it is true that we don’t deserve it. Let’s be honest—most of the time, we really are not all that lovable. You and I are the rebellious children who have not returned our Father’s love but instead have chosen to love how and what we want to love. Yet even in our sin, we are reminded that God is love (1 Jn 4:8b) and that he continues to love us unconditionally, even though we do not deserve it.

The problem with earthly love is that it is all over the place. One moment I love you, and the next I don’t because I’m mad at you. One moment I love you, the next I stab you in the back. But at the face of that Jesus says “Forget about yourself, what you think, how you feel, and don’t judge my love by the ways that the world judges love with, erratic, selfish and interested. Instead, look to me, and I’ll show you true love.”

Hear the words of Jesus again: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him has eternal life.” What that means is that Jesus put his genuine love into action for you by dying on the cross for your sins.

Even though we offer him nothing in return, the Lord says, “This is not the end of your story: I want to write a new, true love story just for you.” He did just that for us by giving up his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. Now your story is not a story of earthly love, but a love that sees it taking place right there at the Cross, just for you!

In the name of true love, God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit. Amen.