

17<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost- EF 2012  
Matthew 22:34-46  
Dcn. Pat Hall

Our Gospel today: love of God and neighbor. What passage cuts more deeply to the core of our Christian faith?

So what is this “love” that we are talking about?

Let me read a short story:

*The huge eighteen-wheel semi pulled up to a truck stop. As fellow truckers watched from nearby diner windows, a middle-aged man emerged removing a wheelchair from the back cab. Opening the passenger-side door, the burly trucker put his arms around a woman, physically lifting her out and into the chair. After arranging her carefully, closing the truck door, he pushed her into the diner. From a now silent table of truckers came the quiet comment, “Now that is love.”<sup>i</sup>*

So much of the love that is portrayed in our media has to do with those compelling urges of romantic attraction. Now don’t get me wrong, I’m a big fan of attraction and affection. But today I’m talking about the love we choose to love with. This is the kind of love like when a mother chooses to attend to her child who has the flu and made a mess of him-self in the middle of the night. There’s nothing very attractive about that. She chooses to sacrifice and act in love. What a beautiful introduction to God for that child.

I was challenged in a big way a few years ago to share that kind of love.

It occurred 5 years ago on my canonical retreat, sometimes called “last chance” retreat. This is the 5-day retreat required of all deacon candidates prior to their ordination. It is the final time of discernment for a candidate to accept God’s call. Well, right in the middle of my scheduled five days, my son, Kevin, was to graduate from U-M. Although not even ordained yet, I came up against the conflict between family and church responsibilities. How this was to be handled could serve as a blueprint for the rest of my life.

Well, I took this conundrum into spiritual direction. My spiritual director (some of you may know Msgr. Fitz) offered, “How about taking the retreat to the graduation?” Well, I jumped at the logistical solution without a clue of what I was in for.

Later, on the morning of graduation, I left my fellow candidates at the retreat house to catch up to my wife and family in Ann Arbor. Coordination over cell phones involved multiple family cars finding parking and then each other inside the Big House, U-M’s football stadium, where the ceremony was being held.

Finally, I sat down with my family all around me. With my binoculars I found where Kevin was sitting on the 40-yard line and then I settled in. I then remembered, "Oh yeah...I'm supposed to take my retreat with me."

I am compliant if nothing else and so I started to relax my mind and told God that I was "retreating" with no expectations other than to dutifully comply with my retreat responsibilities. Well it was then, with more than a bit of surprise, that God started to have a conversation with me. I use the word "conversation" because I don't have a more fitting word to use. It wasn't like there were words being said. It was more like the plays we make up in our imagination, except that while I was thinking up my words, God's words seemed like they were coming from another's imagination.

The conversation started when I was in the middle of appreciating how many tens of thousands of people were in the stadium. They ringed around 2/3 of the way around the bowl. It was in the middle of my taking in the crowd that I heard, "Do you see all these people?" I replied, "Yes." I then heard, "Love them all." I started to throw a blanket of love over all of them.

Now, I like to think of myself as a caring kind of guy. If a group of a half dozen or so people were standing in front of me, I could muster the emotional energy to throw a blanket of care over them. But I was struggling to throw a blanket of love over the tens of thousands there at the stadium. I was straining like I was trying to bench press 200 pounds. In my emotional frustration my heart cried out to the Lord, "I can't. I can't." I then heard with paternal softness and a bit of loving amusement, "Of course you can't...love them with MY love." And with that, the weight left and I was able to cast that blanket over everyone in the stadium. It was effortless (on my part anyways) and I was stunned.

As my natural rhythms started to return to normal, I heard, "Do you see that one next to you?" I knew he was talking about Jan, my wife, and of course I replied yes. I then heard, "She deserves all the love that was shared with these thousands. Can you love her with that love?"

Well, my wife and I had been together for over 30 years. She's my best friend and my partner in raising our children. She has always been first in my love. But as I tried to muster that same emotional strength that I had blanketed the stadium, I started to strain again under that 200-pound weight. But this was more than a struggle; this was starting to turn to anguish as I felt like I was failing, that all my love was insufficient for the one whom I cherished the most. My soul cried out, "I can't! I can't!" But then I heard said with a loving chuckle, "Pat, of course YOU can't. Love her with MY love." And if one could apply a sound effect to that silent scene it would be like a "whoosh" and all the love that held tens of thousands of people just seconds before was focused on that dear lady right next to me. In a moment, I was able to love my wife with a completeness and depth that I hadn't experienced

before. The only thing to which I can compare it is the revelation I had when I held my first-born in my arms and I thought, “Oh, Dad, that’s how you love me.”

I have no idea how long this conversation took. I don’t know if Jan noticed I was quiet for a period of time. There was enough family activity around that my whole event had probably gone unnoticed, though of course I shared it with her later on.

Whatever happened in that bowl was the defining moment of my diaconal journey. I still explore that event in prayer, as I know God has meaning and message in it for me. I have developed some conclusions so far.

First, that although I am a deacon ordained in the Catholic Church, I am to be a deacon to all of God’s children regardless of religious persuasion.

Deacons are called to serve at the altar and in charity, to lead and to teach. But that day I learned my primary diaconal duty is to first love my sisters and brothers...just to remember to love them at every opportunity.

When I serve at communion and present to you “the body of our Lord Jesus Christ” I am told to say in my heart, “I love you” and to say it with God’s love.

I also learned from that event that I am first and foremost to be deacon to my wife. I was already her friend and mate. She has had my entire heart. Now I am also to love her with God’s love, the love that can caress an entire planet.

On that day, I gained an inkling about how to love others with more than my love, but with God’s love.

That would be a beautiful ending, but I am still left with difficult challenges to loving. God has made it apparent that I am to pray for Kristopher Cheyne, Derryl LaFave and Danny Statler. If you don’t know those names, you might be familiar with the names of Officers Trevor Slot and Eric Zapata who were killed by these men in West Michigan.

I do not want to pray for these killers. Somehow, I wish I was the kind of man that could pray for such. Jesus is that kind of man. Jesus is that kind of God. In his moment of most tortured extremis he prayed for his executioners, “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.”<sup>ii</sup>

So how does one choose to “love” in this situation? I can tell you, I don’t have it in me. I’m insufficient to the task and I would leave it at that if it weren’t for that stadium experience. As a step towards that end, God is letting me know in our Scripture passage today that when I come up to an impasse in loving someone else, that I can first begin by loving God with God’s love. He’s offering that love, his very self to you and me right here at this altar, to your heart, to your soul and to your mind, to love him as he loves you<sup>iii</sup> “unto life everlasting”.<sup>iv</sup>

Now that is love.

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<sup>i</sup> *Fire in the Deep*, Robert J. Miller p. 201

<sup>ii</sup> Luke 23: 34

<sup>iii</sup> John 13: 34

<sup>iv</sup> *The Roman Catholic Daily Missal 1962*, Angelus Press, p. 913