

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
October 26, 2014

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“Father, I am having difficulty saying my prayers.” The priest in the confessional often hears that complaint. The same people easily, *but wrongly*, conclude they are unable to love God. In such a case it is good to remember a bit of what Saint John said in his First Epistle (4:20). “He who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.”

Unable to love God? Okay. Then *forget* God! Is there anyone you *do* love? “Yes, Father, I love my son, (or my niece, or my grandmother.)” “Well then, go on loving that person. That is the same thing as loving God.”

Our Lord Jesus told us love of God and love of neighbor as much as you love yourself are two sides to the same coin. This is because God is love. When we say God is love we mean that He is its *origin* and *destination*. Think of it as He owns all the stock in the company! Wherever there is love there is an introduction to loving God. Love of a son or a niece or a grandmother is a legitimate devotion to Almighty God even when we think we are not able to love God. Not only that, but in the course of time such a practice of loving must lead beyond the son or niece or grandmother to God himself. God ceases to be an abstraction and is revealed as Someone Personal. Remember Saint John again. By loving one who is seen we are enabled to love the One Who is unseen. So if anyone loves, he is close to God.

Now of course there is a problem with all this talk about love when we use the English language. We have only *one* word for love. Ancient Greek on the other hand, is the language of the New Testament and the language used by the early Church Fathers. Greek has *three* words for love: *agape*, *eros*, and *philos*: divine love, sexual love, and platonic love. When the Lord used the word “love” in explaining the commandment, He was not talking about a feeling, much less a physical relationship. He was describing love as a *commitment to another*. To show us what He meant, Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan.

We can hardly presume the Good Samaritan had personal feelings of love for the poor soul he saw beaten and lying by the roadside. There two men had never met before that moment. But in taking the poor fellow to an inn and paying for nursing

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care, the Good Samaritan acted lovingly toward him. Our Lord says this is the meaning of the commandment, “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Neighbor does not mean the people who love next door! A neighbor is anyone who enters your sphere of existence, what young people call “my bubble.” How do you treat the person who enters your bubble? Do you act as if he is a pain in the neck and an imposition upon your own self-interest? None of us treats our self that way! We may not *like* ourselves all the time, because we are too conscious of our own unlikable qualities. But we also have a high degree of tolerance for our own failings, and we hope other people will excuse our flaws as we do. Every one of us wants others to realize that, flaws aside, there is a deeper part of us which is redeemable, and which very much desires to be good. We cut ourselves a great deal of slack. We hope that others won’t make up their mind about us just yet.

That is what Our Lord has in mind about our relationship with our neighbor. To love your neighbor as yourself means doing what needs to be done for him, just as you do for yourself, with the same high degree of tolerance, the same generous forgiveness, and the same hope that, looking past his flaws, you will see the good in your neighbor.

We will learn to love by *doing* love, not by trying to feel love. And by doing love to others we can see, we will come to loving God Whom we cannot see. Long ago the writer of the *Book of Ecclesiastes* wrote, “The words of the wise are as goads, and as nails fastened by the masters of assemblies, which are given from one shepherd.” (12:11) We know who the shepherd is. Love is like nails, firmly fixed by the Good Shepherd, and from which is hung everything else, all the glory of the law and the prophets.