What Is Love and What Is Certain
The Very Rev. David J. Marshall, All Angels 9.6.26

Exodus 12:1-14
Psalm 149
Romans 13:8-14
Matthew 18:15-20

I have been thinking this week about certainty and about love. We are living in uncertain times. But, it can't be anything like the uncertainty that the Israelites felt during the plagues in Egypt which led up to the Passover. The reading from Exodus this morning is about the instructions given to them in a quite uncertain time. In contrast, the instructions about how to create a Passover meal are quite certain – do this and you will live.

During my Sabbatical, I read a book about faith practices during uncertain times. It had expressions of faith from the world's faith traditions. There are two comforting things about the book: first, religion, globally speaking, addresses uncertainty. Secondly, there is a universality to the message of how to keep faith in uncertain times. One of the universal aspects is love. Grounding in love, sharing love, trusting in love – that's how one survives uncertain times. There is a certainty, a comfort, to love.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Church in Rome (chapter 13) that "love fulfills the Law". He quotes several of the Commandments and concludes with "love your neighbor as yourself" fulfills all of it. While I am certain of that, there are some assumptions that I'd like to talk about. I can't answer for what they knew in the 1st century in Rome, but I can tell you today, we often make assumptions about love. Loving your neighbor as yourself assumes that you know what love is.

We know that love is a feeling but it's more than a feeling. It's because feelings come and feelings go. Love is more than an emotion because emotions can be manipulated and changed and moved. Love, biblically speaking, never ends (where emotions come and go). Love, as talked about in the Bible, is different than a feeling and different than emotion. Love is an action, not an emotion. Love is a commitment. Love is something you do and not something necessarily that you feel.

The second assumption is that Paul believes that his readers his followers understand that love is not given by subtraction. Pizza, on the other hand, is given by subtraction. If you have friends over, say you have eight friends, and you have a pizza and there's eight slices and you start giving out a slice per friend, are you going to have any pizza? No. Because pizza is given out by subtraction. Love is different than that. Love is that you have eight friends over and you can share love with them. And the more that you share love, the more that you have. Often when we hear that the greatest commandment is this, *love God with all your heart. Love God with all your mind and your soul and your strength*. If you're like me, you might say to yourself, "But I love my children." I love my cat. So, if I love God with all my heart, if it's a pizza, there's nothing left for anybody else. Going back to assumption number one, what is love? So, love is the type of thing that the more you give, the more you get.

You can love God with all of your heart and you can love your spouse. You can love your children, your grandchildren. You can love your pets. You can love your favorite sports team. You can love your church. You can love your neighbor. The more that you love, the more that you receive because love is not a pizza. I guess if you get anything out of this, just know that love is not a pizza. Assumption number two is that love is something that is not given by subtraction. Love is given by multiplication. The more that you love, the more that you receive. If you love God with all of your heart, you will have plenty of room in your heart to love your family and your friends and your neighbor.

The third assumption is frankly that you love yourself. "Love your neighbor as (much) yourself." But what if don't love yourself. Look, it's just you and me here. So, let me ask you this: do you love yourself? Have you thought about that? Today, I can answer that question in the affirmative; but, that's not always been the case. I have had to go through steps to love me for who I am (and not who I wished I could be or in comparison to anyone else). How about you?

The Apostle Paul is questionable about loving himself, frankly, as he refers to himself this way: O miserable wretch that I am. St. Peter, when he realized who Jesus is, said to him: Depart from me, I am a sinful man (and not worthy to have you in my boat). There is evidence that Moses and the prophet Jonah had self-loathing, from time to time. So, it happens.

There's an old adage: you can't give away what you don't have. I think that applies to love. How can you give love if you don't love yourself?

I went to a Roman Catholic university. There were some fellow students who despised themselves but appeared to love God. I think it was more fear-God than love God and perhaps that's what made them despise themselves. They didn't like who they were or how they were made. I don't think that is what God wants us to think about ourselves. The psalmist says: you were wonderfully and beautifully made. I think that's what God thinks about us.

When I was a chaplain, I met a Vietnam combat veteran who did not love himself. It troubled me so I raised the question with my boss. He said there's a three-step process for loving oneself. Step one: respect yourself. Step two: have compassion for yourself. Step three: forgive yourself.

Step one: Respect yourself. Are you respecting yourself? Are you respecting your own boundaries? Are you respecting your abilities? If you can respect yourself, you can respect others. You can let others be who they are. You can set boundaries and let people do what they're going to do. If you can respect yourself, you can respect God. To love ourselves, it begins with respect. Are we respecting ourselves? If not, we can take steps to begin to respect who we are, what our needs are, and what our boundaries are. God respects us. We will not be forced to follow God or do what God wants. Every person in the Bible who followed God did so because they chose to – not because God made them. With Mother Mary, the mother of Jesus, it was explained to her what God's plan was. She then said: Let it be with me according to your word. God respects us, our boundaries, how we are made, what we are good at, and what we struggle with.

Step two: compassion. Can you find compassion for yourself, for who you are, how you were made, how you come up with decisions? Compassion for your strengths and your weaknesses. Compassion for knowing that you are a simple finite human being who can make mistakes. And if you can find compassion for yourself, if you can allow yourself room to breathe with who you are, you will find you have compassion for your neighbor.

Step three: forgiveness. Can you forgive yourself? Can you see that you've done things wrong and you will do things wrong? Thankfully, you can learn to forgive yourself. Learn to let go, learn to release, learn to let go of the things that you've done wrong. It takes respect. It takes compassion in order to forgive yourself. But that brings us down the path of loving ourselves. And again, you can't give away that you don't have. If you don't respect yourself, if you don't have compassion, if you don't forgive yourself, it's very hard to give that to somebody else. And so on this Sunday, when we think about uncertainty and we think about love, the scripture gives us this pattern of how to behave.

God respects us and in turn we can respect ourselves and each other. God has compassion on us. God knows how we're made and the things that we do and things that we can do right and things that we can do wrong. And God forgives us infinitely more than we can ever understand.

God did that first for us, put it inside of us – the ability to love, to respect, have compassion, and offer forgiveness. God now invites us to do that with one another. So knowing what love is, knowing that it's not a feeling and that it's a practice, it's a daily thing, it's something you can work at. Knowing that we have this wonderful ability to love ourselves and to love one another and also remembering that love is not subtraction and that by loving God with all of your heart, loving his message, loving his son, loving mother Mary, loving all of these people that the more that we do this, the more that we find that we have love for ourselves and that for compassion and for forgiveness.

The more that we do this, the more that we can have compassion on our neighbors, the more that we can forgive our neighbors, and then the more love and compassion that we have. It is the fulfilling of the Law. It is how to live in uncertain times. Love is universally the way for all of us.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.