

I'll Love You Forever

Easter 5, Year C – John 13:31-35

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, April 28, 2013

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Maybe it was because, while looking at this morning's lesson from John's gospel, different images of love were swirling around in my head. Maybe it was because I had reason this week to do a lot of thinking about my two boys. Maybe it was because Mother's Day is coming up in a couple of weeks, but I am going to be away that morning. Whatever the reason, at some point early in the week, I got to thinking about an old favorite from my Daddy-to-his-little-boys bedtime reading days, and I felt like I just had to share it with you this morning.

Many of you probably already know Robert Munsch's classic, *Love You Forever*, but for those that don't, and for those that don't remember, *Love You Forever* begins with a mother rocking her newborn baby and singing a lullaby:

*I'll love you forever,
I'll like you for always,
As long as I'm living,
My baby you'll be.*

I hope you'll forgive me, I think over the years, I've forgotten the actual tune.

As the years go by, of course, the baby grows. He becomes a toddler, and get into everything. His budding vocabulary is almost single-mindedly dominated by the word, "NO!" His mother says, "This kid is driving me CRAZY!" But at night, both of them exhausted, she pulls him into her lap and sings him their special song:

*I'll love you forever,
I'll like you for always,
As long as I'm living,
My baby you'll be.*

The baby grows some more. He's eight years old, then nine. He never wants to take a bath. He says bad words when his grandma visits. His mother sometimes feels like selling him to the Zoo. But still, at night, she sits by his bedside and sings their song:

*I'll love you forever,
I'll like you for always,
As long as I'm living,
My baby you'll be.*

The boy becomes a teenager, and, of course, that's the worst! He has strange friends. He wears strange clothes. He listens to strange music. His mother feels like *she's* the one who lives in a Zoo! But guess what? At night, when he is safely asleep, she still stands in the doorway and sings to him:

*I'll love you forever.
I'll like you for always,
As long as I'm living,
My baby you'll be.*

Finally, the boy has become a man. He has his own work and his own responsibilities. He leaves his mother's home and moves into his own. He builds his own life, his own world. But sometimes, when she is invited to peek in on this other world, when his home is dark and quiet, his mother creeps to his room and sings – well, you know what she sings: (You can sing along, if you want.)

*I'll love you forever,
I'll like you for always,
As long as I'm living,
My baby you'll be.*

As the story comes to an end, the mother is old and ill. She tries to sing to her boy, but she isn't able to finish the song. Her son, however, knows what to do. Holding his mother close, he rocks her in his arms, and sings:

*I'll love you forever,
I'll like you for always,
As long as I'm living,
My Mommy you'll be.*

And when he returns home that night, he stands for a long time at the top of the stairs. Then, going into the room where his *own* new baby daughter is sleeping, he takes her in his arms and rocks her singing:

*I'll love you forever,
I'll like you for always,
As long as I'm living,
My baby you'll be.*

And the story ends as it begins. The cycle of love between parent and child begins again. Because, as we know already from experience, love begets love.

For many, if not most of us, our first experience of love was in the arms of our own parents, with distant memories that make Mr. Munsch's story echo somewhere deep down. Others of us, regrettably, may have gotten a slower start: perhaps distance or pain or busy-ness or limitations stood in the way of making that sort of connection. Perhaps they *still* stand in the way. But the soft way or the hard way, all of us have learned the lesson, haven't we, that love does not happen by words or even by catchy cradle songs. If we have lived at all, we have learned that only love begets love.

And that is *precisely* what Jesus is speaking about in this morning's Gospel lesson when he gives his disciples, and *us*, a new commandment: that we should *love* one another. His commandment comes as part of a longer conversation with his disciples, his last chance to teach them before his betrayal and trial and execution. Jesus still has some things that need to be said. He still has some messages that need to be driven home. He still has a song that needs to be sung one more time so that it will sink in to the disciples' hearts – *and* into ours. "I am with you only a little longer," he says. "You will look for me, but where I am going you cannot come." And because they could not follow where he was going, because *we* cannot follow him to the cross and to the grave and to his Father's right hand, he gives us a "new" commandment: that we should *love* one another.

We are to love one another, Jesus says, not just with easy, natural, all-too-often-fragile human love, but with the consistent, persistent, never-ending, never-failing love that we *ourselves* have been given in Christ. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples," he concludes "if you have love for one another." As we take another step into our celebration of the wonderful gift of love and life we have been given from the mouth of an empty tomb, let us thank God for our mothers and our fathers, for our children, however badly they have outgrown our bedtime lullabies, for siblings and spouses and companions through life, and for the many, many *others* whose love has made us who we are. Let us thank God for *all* those whose love has been a reflection of Christ's love for us. And let us pray that God will also use each of *us* to sing his song of mercy and grace, of forgiveness and peace, of joy and love, to one another, for sure, and to all those who so desperately need to hear it:

*I'll love you forever,
I'll love you for always,*

*As long as forever,
My children you'll be.*

For by *this* everyone will know that we are Christians: that we love one another. Amen.