

First Love

5th Sunday of Easter, Year B – 1 John 4:19a

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, May 3, 2015

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.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

I remember the day that Jenny and I decided to get married. We had known each other for three years, singing together in the choir at Madison Street Methodist Church in Clarksville. I had apparently continued in not-so-blissful ignorance for much of those three years, as Jenny tried one thing after another to let me know that she was interested in spending more time with me than just Wednesday evening rehearsals and Sunday morning services. Cookies in my music slot – she was just being nice. Homemade pecan pies for special occasions – she must have known I needed them. Invitations for holiday meals with family – well, I had to eat someplace. We have sometimes joked that her next move to get me to wake up was a 2x4 up the side of my head. Thankfully, it didn't come to that. Many of you have already heard that my proposal was probably one of the most pathetically *incompetent* in human history, but if you haven't heard that short, sad story, it'll have to wait for another time. Because the day I realized that Jenny loved me, the day I realized that she had chosen me, the day I knew that I had first priority in someone's life, was, and continues to be, one of the happiest moments in my life.

Jenny and I remember that moment a lot, she mostly with a sneering smile at that pathetically incompetent part, but *still*. We don't often talk about an associated moment that is equally important to me, but I think about it a great deal in the quieter times of my life. I think about it when, because of our somewhat complicated commuter lifestyle, I'm missing Jenny a little more than usual. I think about it when we're together running from this place to that place trying to shove all the together stuff into the time we *do* have. And I think about it when we're sitting quietly doing nothing much more than just being the old married couple we once only joked about becoming. I thought about this other moment this week, as I was struggling with which of the gazillion entry points into today's reading from 1 John I wanted to use this morning.

Not long at all after the infamously pathetic proposal, Jenny and I drove out to Dover, Tennessee, to the park at Fort Donelson National Battlefield. We went there because it was a still crisp, but *pretty* spring day, and a drive seemed like a good thing to do. We went there because Jenny correctly assumed that her still-young-lieutenant of a boyfriend would enjoy the relics of a civil war battlefield. And we went there to visit the Fort Donelson National Cemetery, where Jenny's mother is laid to rest, as I remember it, anyway, for Jenny to introduce her new fiancé.

Drive taken, sights seen, and introductions made, Jenny and I were just walking in that way that people with young knees do, when Jenny asked me a question that, in one way, still stumps me to this day. I remember that we had, for that particular moment, finally let go of each other's hand, and I was looking off away from her when Jenny asked, "Tell me *why* you love me." I remember glancing back at her to see her gazing at me even when I wasn't looking, and then immediately turning again to look out over a little valley. I remember being a little panicked, because I didn't really have anything that I thought might be the *right* answer. So I gave Jenny the only answer that I *had*, the same answer that I have thirty-two years later, "I love you because you love *me*."

I remember the day – I was thirteen – when I realized the big distinction between me loving God, and God loving me.

Don't get me wrong, you *know* I had been brought up in church. From probably the second Sunday of my life, I was in church. (I was born on a Sunday, or no doubt I would have been there on the first Sunday as well.) I do not remember a single Sunday morning discussion as to whether or not we should go to church – it simply wasn't an issue in the Martindale house. I don't remember a single time when I asked if I could skip *Youth Group* – though I'm not sure if that is because I knew what the answer would be and therefore didn't bother asking, or whether I *did* ask and the answer was so firm that the whole discussion has passed from my consciousness. I don't remember any of those discussions about Wednesday

night prayer meeting, either. And I was in college before I saw *The Wonderful World of Disney*, because it aired on Sunday evenings – when we were in church, *again*. Church was a part of our family's life.

Church was a part of *my* life. I was a little gold medal winning star of the Sunday School. I had been to the altar rail to confess my sins and receive Jesus into my heart *dozens* of times. I had declared Jesus as my personal Lord and Savior and been baptized by full immersion, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. I knew enough Bible verses to earn several Bibles as prizes. I still *have* some of them. I could recite the books of the Bible and the names of the twelve disciples. I knew the song *Jesus Loves Me, This I Know* by heart – and back then I knew *all* the verses.

But that day when I was thirteen, something was said, or something was done, or I *felt* something, that made me understand that everything that Christ did – the crown of thorns, the whipping, the cross – *everything* was because he loves *me*.

We were each chosen, you and I, before the foundation of the universe. We were chosen before angels sang the first Alleluia. Even if it makes no logical sense at all, we were chosen before time, before there was a before. We were chosen by the absolute, infinite, unquenchable, never-changing, never-failing love of God. We have been chosen to know in the core of our being the love that set a million, million stars ablaze. We have been chosen to return to its giver the love that walked the dusty road to Calvary, the love that felt the nails and the spear, the love that was shut for a moment in darkness of death's tomb. We have been chosen to *share* the love that shattered the power of sin and death *forever* as it burst from that tomb in the blinding glory of the Resurrection. We have been chosen to bear that love in our hearts. And we have been chosen to sing his love for us with our every action, with our every word, with our every thought. I love him, you see, because, as unlikely as it sometimes seems, he loves *me*.

“We love,” John says, “because he first loved us.” It's really the only answer I've ever had.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!