

We have just listened to the familiar Gospel reading describing the meeting between Peter and Jesus after the resurrection. In his three-fold denial of any association with Jesus, Peter’s betrayal is no different from that of Judas. Yet, Peter was, and remains, the rock on which Jesus founded his church.

Today’s Scriptures are the story of love, not primarily Peter’s, or our, love for God, but God’s faithful love for us. As the author of the New Testament first letter of John reminds us: “In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he has loved us and sent his Son as expiation for our sins. Beloved, if God has so loved us, we must also love one another” (I Jn. 4:10,11).

What ultimately redeems Peter in the face of his betrayal, and us in our sin, is not his, or our, love for Jesus, but God’s love in Jesus, especially in his death and resurrection.

What does it mean to love someone? We have a multitude of stories, ballads and songs about love. Yet many, if not most, of these popular creations incarnate, or remain, on the level of emotional love—feeling, falling, or “being in love”—romantic love. Certainly there is nothing wrong with this kind of love, but love if it is to truly become genuine must grow beyond this initial awakening.

When it comes to God’s love for us two characteristics stand out—fidelity and respect.

First of all, fidelity. Love means keeping your word, staying with a relationship and not walking away—in a word “commitment”. We see this fidelity in God’s love for us from the first pages of the Bible. Immediately after the Original Sin of our first parents Adam and Eve, God promises a redeemer. Later in the book of Exodus, God enters into a covenant with Israel, and ultimately us, when he tells the people through Moses, “I will be your God and you will be my people’ (Ex. 20). God’s faithfulness is tested and

remains steadfast in spite of the people's continued infidelity at the times of the prophets. Finally, we come to Jesus. So many of Jesus' most beloved parables are stories of unmerited forgiveness; of a God who "searches out and saves the lost"; a God who cannot, will not, go back on his word, his love for us. Despite his stumbling attempts at discipleship revealed in other places in the gospels, despite his betrayal, Jesus remained faithful to Peter, to his love for him, would not go back on his designation of him as the "rock upon which I will build my church" (Mt. 16:18).

Secondly, love means fully respecting someone else, not violating anyone's freedom, positively blessing and helping another to grow according to their own internal dictates however long that process may take. Jesus allowed Peter the time and space he needed to grow in love, to come, eventually, to such a complete God-like self-emptying love as lived by Jesus and fully revealed on the cross, that Peter's love for Jesus and for Jesus' followers would lead him to eventually lay down his life through a martyr's death, also by being crucified. Such was Jesus' love for Peter, and Peter's transformation through it. Whatever our past or present, whatever our sin, God's love for us, like for Peter, has the power to redeem and transform us if we, like Peter, open ourselves humbly to it.

Love, this side of eternity is not easy. That is why it is a gift, a divine grace from a God who can do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. This love not only saves us individually, but also enable us to remain together inside family and community. In the end, that is what church and the Eucharist are about and meant to do.

On the night before he died, Jesus sat down with his disciples and what he found there is what we find as we gather again today in this Mass—a sincere bunch of people struggling not to let the jealousies, irritations, self-preoccupations, and wounds of life drive them apart. We come to church and to the Eucharist to ask God to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves, to love us into fullness of life and to love each other in the way we have been loved.