

HOMILY 6th SUN EASTER YRB 2018

A few years ago I taught a class at Madonna as part of a hospice class. The topic of the class was “The Catholic Perspective on End of Life Issues.” It was a 3 hour class, so we were able to discuss quite a few issues. One of the points I made was that we are unique as human beings because we are made in the image and likeness of God and have the capacity to love as God loves. To be able to love as God loves we must have free will and the ability to choose not to love, otherwise we would be just acting out of instinct. This capacity to love separates human beings from the rest of God’s creation. As part of this discussion I said: “You may think that your dog loves you, but your dog does not.” I had not really planned to make this statement; it was kind of an aside. When I got the evaluations from the class, over half of the class said that they disagree with me. They thought that their dog did love them. I guess I struck a nerve. I highly value evaluations and getting the feedback and since then I have thought a lot about that. I think that at least part of the issue is that we have many different definitions of love, and I am not sure what is going on with dogs and their owners, but dogs do not have the ability to love as God loves and as human beings have the capacity to love.

The readings today are all about love, so I want to talk about love today. In the Gospel reading Jesus commands us to: “Love one another as I love you.” This is the new commandment, a command not a suggestion. The author C. S. Lewis wrote that there are two types of love. The first is “need love” and the second is “gift love.” Let’s talk about “need love” first. With this type of love I need you and want you because you meet my needs. This could roughly be described in theological terms as “Eros.” This may be what is going on with dogs and their owners. You feed me, walk me, give me shelter, pet me, and brush me, so I need you and want you so I appear all excited when you come home. We also experience this with close family and friends. Because you meet my social needs, I enjoy being around you, you bring joy into my life, etc so I need you and want you. This type of love is a feeling and comes naturally to us, and really feels great when we experience it. However this can

change when and if our needs stop being met. If our close relationships with our relatives and friends are going to endure, we must also develop “gift love”

“Gift love” is not based upon needs being met or upon a feeling. It does not come naturally to us; it is an act of will. The goal of “gift love” is to enhance the other person. This is the way that God loves us. It does not come naturally to us, but we are capable of it. This love always comes from our relationship with God. The model that Jesus gives us is the cross, so it is a sacrificial love. This type of love is not based upon need or feelings. This can start with “need love” but does not have to. You can give “gift love” to people that you do not know very well, that you do not like, even to people that you find annoying. This type of love could roughly be called agape in theological terms. Developing this capacity to love is something we need to work on and develop for the rest of our lives. Your dog does not have the capacity to love you with “gift love.”

In the first reading Peter the apostle meets Cornelius a Gentile. At that time the Jews saw Gentiles as unclean. Peter says to him: “Do not fall at my feet and give me homage. Get up. We are equals.” As long as Peter saw Cornelius as inferior, he was not capable of “gift love,” but once he sees him as an equal, “gift love” is possible. For “gift love” to be possible we cannot judge others as inferior. All prejudice and disrespect interferes with “gift love.” The closer we come in our relationship with God, the more we are capable of “gift love” If we do not love with “gift love,” this interferes with our ability to grow closer to God. Jesus tells us in the Gospel reading: “If you keep my commandments you will remain in my love.” This means following the 10 Commandments. If we break the 10 Commandments it is always a failure of “gift love.”

We do not need to work at “need love,” that comes naturally. If we are going to have lasting relationships in our marriages, our family relationships, our close friendships, we need to work on “gift love,” that is sacrificial. We need to work on “gift love” with everyone we meet. Remember the Commandment that Jesus gives us: “Love one another as I love you.”