Sunday, May 14, 1978
LOVE AND THE FAMILY
I John 4:7-14

Today on this Sunday traditionally known as Mother's Day and known by the church as the Festival of the Christian Home, I want to talk with you about love and particularly about love within the family.

A few years ago, an experienced counselor and psychiatrist wrote a book entitled, LOVE OR PERISH. In the introduction to the book, he wrote these words.

"For more than forty years, I have sat in my office and listened while people of all ages and classes told me of their hopes and fears, their likes and dislikes, and of what they considered good or bad about themselves and the world around them. I have listened while mature people tried to piece together the converging patterns of their troubled lives. I have listened while adolescents confided their secret resentments and anxieties, and while very young children told me by indirection where things were going wrong with them. I have listened, too, while the elderly explained where they had failed, where succeeded, and what hopes they cherished for the future.

As I look back over the long, full years, one truth emerges clearly in my mind — the universal need for love. Whether they think they do or not, all people want love. Their spoken words may tell of other things, but their need for love is evident in many ways. We cannot survive without love. We must have it or we will perish. For without love, we lose the will to live. Our mental and physical vitality is impaired, our resistance is lowered, and we succumb to illnesses that often prove fatal. We may escape actual death, but what remains is a meager and barren existence, emotionally so impoverished that we can only be called half alive."

Through his forty years' experience of helping people in all kinds of crises, this counselor and psychiatrist discovered what love is basic to our human existence.

The Christian Faith has been proclaiming the very same thing for centuries — ever since Christ was on this earth in the flesh.

This is what the writer of I John in the New Testament was talking about when he wrote the words of our text for today-- Page 2 "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God and he who loves is born of God and knows God." And then the writer of I John goes on to tell us how God started it all and how God continually shows his love for us — "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. Beloved if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another."

Among other things, the writer of our text is saying that Love is the power behind and in all of creation. Love is God working in his creation. It is a force and power that has no equal. Love is the creative force of God in the world, and we experience this force in and through our love of persons and their love for us. God makes himself known in and through persons.

If Love then is the basis behind and in all of life — the power in life, then it follows that you and I do not truly live until we know love in our own experience. It is as we 1earn to 1ove and 1earn to accept the vo1untary love of others, in the family and outside the family, that we find life in its fullest joy.

Being able to accept love is the real problem for some persons. We all know people like this — people who feel uncomfortable or even kind of guilty whenever you try to give them anything or do something for them.

Many of us are this way. We find it difficult to accept love because in the past, perhaps in our families, love was not freely and voluntarily given, but was usually connected with something. It had to be earned. Have you heard someone say, “If you don’t do this, I won’t love you"? And even if it’s not said in words, we often imply this, or have it implied to us. Thus, some of us are now almost afraid to accept love because we secretly suspect that there are some strings attached, or that we have not earned it like we think we’re supposed to, or maybe we’re simply tired of always working to earn another’s love or feel that we can’t live up to it.

Thus, since love, in our families and outside them, has often been and still is often misused, misunderstood, we not only find it difficult to accept the love of others, but difficult to love others. The same fact is that we use the word love and the threat of withholding love as an excuse for all kinds of actions that are really quite selfish and in the final analysis have nothing to do with love at all.

Love, like any other force or power can be misused and mis- directed and when that happens it becomes destructive.

In order then, to better understand the nature of love in our families and what it can do, I want you to listen now to a true story. This is a story told by Dr. Reuel Howe in his book — THE CREATIVE YEARS — the story of Jane Foster.

Jane had been a lovely girl and her parents had done their best to give her every advantage. She was most attractive and popular and had many talents. In her twenty-first year she fell in love with an able and handsome young man. On the eve of her marriage, she collapsed, and the ceremony had to be indefinitely postponed. As first it seemed as if she were exhausted and that a good rest was all that she needed. Her condition grew worse, however. She was depressed, made several attempts on her life, and finally had to be taken to a mental hospital. Even there, she deteriorated until she would do nothing for herself. She simply sat in a corner, day after day. looking at the floor, a pathetic contrast to the bright creature she used to be.

Naturally, her family and close friends were shocked at this change in her, for which there seemed to be no explanation. The doctors talked to her parents, her fiancé, and others who might throw light on her case. But her condition remained the same — inert, sullen, silent. The weeks in which she remained in this condition passed into months and the months into a year.

Toward the end of the year, Dr. Miller, superintendent of the hospital where Jane was a patient, began sitting for his portrait. The artist, George Duncan, encouraged Dr. Miller to talk about his work. One day, Dr. Miller told him about Jane’s case and confessed his sense of helplessness. As in all such cases, the person remains inaccessible. Nothing that we say seems to reach her; and she says nothing. None of the usual treatments have the expected effect on her.

The artist went on painting while the doctor continued to talk about the case. Finally, he asked if he could see Jane. They left the Doctor’s office and went down the long lonely white corridors of the hospital to where Jane sat on the floor in the corner. The artist stood on the threshold, looking at the girl who seemed more dead than alive — a human being whose spirit

had departed, leaving only a mechanically breathing body. All signs of animation and creativity were gone, and only hopeless isolation remained. Jane was the complete embodiment of despair and defeat, a condition that on occasion we all experience partially.

The artist stood there for just a few moments, then he moved slowly toward her, at the same time drawing something from his coat pocket. Then he stopped down and held out his hand, under her apparently unseeing eyes, a lump of clay that he gently molded with his fingers. There was no indication of response from the girl; in a few moments he rose to his feet and went out with the doctor.

“May I drop in and see Jane whenever I come to work on your portrait?” he asked. “Her condition challenges my belief in the inherent creativity of people, and I’d like to try to reach her.”

Permission was granted and each time the artist finished his work on the portrait, he went back to see Jane. And each time he repeated the routine of his first visit. He stooped down, held out his hand before Jane’s eyes, and slowly worked the clay with his fingers. The portrait was soon finished, but he continued to come back to the hospital to visit Jane. Then one day she timidly reached out her hand and touched the clay. On another of his visits, she took the clay in her hands. Later she took the clay and closed her fingers around it; and when she opened them, she looked wonderingly at the impression she had made on the clay.

Visit followed visit, and each time there was a little more response. Then one day she worked the clay with both hands, slowly and hesitantly; hers was the unmistakable action of a person once again beginning to respond to the stir of life. But never during all of this did she lift her head or look at the artist. Her appearance continued to be that of one afraid.

In all these weeks, the artist had not spoken to Jane either, but had trusted only in what he could say through his presence and actions. Finally, one day when she was working the clay into rude shapes, he spoke her name softly: “Jane.” Her hands paused, her head came up slowly, and with caution she looked at him, the first person she had looked at for months. No one can really know what happened between the artist and the girl at that moment as they looked at each other. A deep meeting was certainly taking place between them, because as time went on, the girl became less afraid and more trusting. But yet, she did not speak, nor did she smile.

The lump of clay, however, had become a bond between them, and now the artist was helping her to work it into more complex forms. She seemed to be trying to shape something that would not come. She became increasingly tense and irritable. Finally, she threw the clay down on the table where they were working and hit it angrily with her clenched fist, then she looked at him anxiously. He smiled at her and put his hand over her clenched fist and angry one. Wonderingly she looked down at his hand on hers as both rested on the shapeless clay; gradually a faint smile softened the anxious hopelessness that had shown on her face for so many months. Reassured, the returned to their work and the artist said, “you see, Jane, I like you and believe in you, so you don’t need to worry when things don’t go right.”

It was then that she spoke for the first time in months. Searching his face, she said wonderingly, “You like me?”

From this time on her progress was rapid. Before long, Jane was able to talk to her doctors, and little by little they were able to piece together the story of what led to her breakdown. And

as we listen to that story, we discover that the difference between Jane and the rest of us is one of agree only.

Jane's parents had struggled to achieve the financial and social position that was theirs. And they had had great hopes and plans for their older daughter. They loved her, but their anxiety for her to excel in popularity and accomplishment had made her feel that she would be loved only so long as she continued to meet their expectations. Love was not free, she felt. She had to buy it, to earn it with good behavior and with achievement in those areas that were important to the people from whom she looked for love.

When she approached marriage, she brought with her the same concept of love. But she was so emotionally exhausted from her efforts to meet the demands of love as she understood them, that she could not face the demands of the marriage love-relationship that lay ahead of her. Quite appropriately, on the eve of her marriage, she fled from life and love and found refuge in illness.

Now as we said, the difference between Jane, her parents and ourselves is one of degree only. And this story tells us much about the nature and meaning of love within and outside our families.

1. In the first place, because love is so basic to life and has such power, if it is misused or misdirected, it can be quite destructive. Jane's parents loved her the best they knew how, but their love was overly selfish and possessive in that they expected her to do what they needed her to do. Their love was not voluntary and freely given. Jane felt all the time that she had to earn their love. Thus, it awakened in her a fear of love, and she became afraid to face the normal responsibilities and risks of a new love.

So, it is with many of us. Perhaps some of us feel that we have had to earn any love which we ever got — that love was not given freely. If so, then we too, may be afraid to take the risk of loving others and being loved by others. And we have to be careful so that in our love within our families, in our love for our children and others around us, we do not become demanding, but rather give of our love freely expecting nothing in return.

Yet how often we have heard persons say and perhaps we ourselves have said in our families — "don't you understand how much we've sacrificed for you and loved you and yet you treat us like this?"

But true love is not self-centered demand; it does not count the cost or sacrifice. True love does not ask to be paid pack. Love gives itself, voluntarily. This is of course what is meant by Christian love — for we know that this is what God has done in Jesus Christ. We don't earn God's love--it is freely given. Jesus did not love the sinner any less than the righteous man. And Jesus did not count the cost of love — in fact his love for man cost him his life.

The gift of love then is a personal gift, and it is not made in order to hold or use the loved one. We love simply because God loves us.

2. And this brings us to the second point which the story of Jane Foster portrays. Love being basic to life and being the creative power of God therefore has within it the power to awaken life and to re-awaken life. This of course is exactly what happened in the case of Jane Foster. She was literally born again through the power of love. It was the power of love as expressed through the artist that healed and renewed the life of Jane. This is what happened almost

every time Jesus came into contact with a person. The artist, as did Jesus, accepted Jane as she was. He was interested in her as a person. She did not have to earn his love in any way. It was freely given. He held out his hand to her every day whether she accepted it or not. When she got angry, he did not get angry in return, but accepted her anger. His love for Jane gave her new life. Here we see the power of God at work in human relationships. As the writer of I John put it — if we love one another, God abides in us, and his love is perfected in us.

At the same time, we need to know that there is always a risk involved in this kind of self-giving love. A while ago, we had a sermon dealing precisely with this fact — the inconvenience of Love. Jane's parents could not accept the risk of love. They could not accept her when she said "no" to them.

The risk of love is simply that the person we love may not always accept our love and in fact may turn against us. Yet this shouldn't surprise us as Christians. We know what happened to Jesus. However, the Gospel tells us, and the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus show us that when we do accept the risk of love a tremendous power is released in our life, in the life of our families and with all those whom we meet.

The love of the artist for Jane was freely given. He expected nothing in return. Jane was loved because she was a person.

It is this kind of love that we are talking about when we speak of love in the Christian context.

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God and he who loves is born of God and knows God. Amen.