It’s about LOVE not creeds!
Easter 5B

“God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God in them. Beloved, let us love one another because love is of God. You cannot love God, whom you have not seen, if you hate your neighbour, whom you have seen. If we love God, we should love our sisters and brothers as well.”

There’s a song that I remember from my youth-group days. I won’t sing it to you, but the words go like this: “Love, love, love, that’s what it’s all about, cause God loves us we love each other, mother, father, sister, brother, love, love, love, everybody sing and shout cause that’s what it’s all about.”

I’m tempted to leave it at that and end this sermon right now. Why not, the sun is shining, its one of the first really warm, sunny Sunday’s we’ve had after a long cold winter. “Love, love, love, that’s what it’s all about, cause God loves us we love each other, mother, father, sister, brother, love, love, love, everybody sing and shout cause that’s what it’s all about!”

Our sisters and brothers are hurting so love them. Love the people of Nepal, love the people of Baltimore, love those who are suffering, love your mother, father, sister, brother, love, love, love, that’s what it’s all about. I could just leave it at that. I’m sorely tempted to leave it at that. But there’s this other line in the text. It’s just a little line, maybe with all that talk of love you might have missed it; after all its one of only two times it appears in the entire New Testament and this particular translation of the bible does soften it a little, so maybe we can just forget about it and get out of here early and enjoy the sunshine: Love, love, love, that’s what it’s all about!

If only the loud screams of all those Christians who latch on to those words weren’t ringing in my ears, I’d be happy to leave it at God is love. If only these words could be shoved back into the past where they belong: “Love, then, consists in this: not that we have loved God, but that God has loved us and has sent the Only Begotten to be an offering for our sins.”

Previous translations put it this way: “In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.” Oh Jesus……Oh Jesus…I can hear all those preachers in my head telling me, telling you, telling the whole world, that Jesus died for our sins and you know perfectly well what that means. We are so wicked, so evil, so unlovable that the only way God can bring himself, and I do mean himself here folks, the only way the Almighty faraway sky-god can bring himself to love us is to bath us in the blood of the lamb. Sweet Jesus must die in our place as a sacrifice for our sin so that we can be washed in the blood of the lamb, scrubbed clean of our inequities so that we can be robed in white, and be worthy to stand before the throne of the King of the universe, where Jesus will plead our case, so that we can be forgiven and ushered into receive our eternal reward. Failure to believe that Jesus died for our sins will lead to one place and one place only, the fiery pits of Hell, where upon we will be beset by the torments of the damned for all eternity. Love….love….love….that’s what it’s all about……..

I know, I know, I’ve gone too far….I’ve made a mockery out of a theology which many of us, myself included once found perfectly acceptable. I’ve exaggerated, and I’ve failed to express the finer nuances of grace and I’ve made it sound so very silly. I’ve been unfair to the theologians who have gone before me. Yes, I freely admit that there is a way of understanding Jesus as an atoning sacrifice for our sins that does not make God out to be some sort of sadistic monster. But you’ve
got to admit that the voices we hear in our head tend not to be the calm understanding, theologically trained, academics, who have all the answers.

I don’t know about you, but the idea that LOVE needs an atoning sacrifice for sin, doesn’t sound like love to me; not the kind of love I want to believe in, not the kind of LOVE I want to spend my life wrapped up in.

Last month, I went to Belfast, a place where they have been living with this kind of love for centuries, and I’ve got to tell you that I am done, with atoning sacrifice. Done. I went to Belfast to meet with about 40 people from around the world who gathered to explore radical theology. Peter Rollins pulled together some excellent speakers and over the next few weeks and months I hope to share with you some of the things that are stirring in me as a result of my time in Belfast. But for now, I want to tell you about what happened to me after the conference was over, when I went to church on Sunday morning.

I choose to worship at St. Anne’s Cathedral, also known as Belfast Cathedral, partly because it was right next-door to my hotel, but mostly because it is the church where my mother was Christened and where my Nannie and Granda were married. St. Anne’s Cathedral is a member of the Church of Ireland which is part of the Anglican Communion. So, it’s liturgy is very similar to the traditional Lutheran liturgy. I’m an introvert, quite shy in fact. So, I sat down and buried my head in the bulletin.

Share the highlights in the bulletin: (the audio is more explicit)

“Visitors are most welcome”

“Baptized members of Christian churches are welcome to join fully in this Eucharist. It’s the Lord’s table and this invitation is given in His name.”

Clearly, they haven’t heard of the Ethiopian Eunuch – the Ethiopian Eunuch said, “What’s to stop me from being baptized?” Well what’s to stop someone who is not a Christian from coming to the table?

“You are cautioned to keep your personal positions with you at all times.”

Penitence – Jesus died for us sinners.

Hymn of Praise – in Latin – Jesus died for us...

Nicene Creed: which I could not say – so I left.

So, let’s look at the Apostle’s creed….every Sunday in worship….

I believe:

Absence of Jesus’ life. The creeds reduce the life of Jesus to a comma.

Jesus of Nazareth taught us how to live.

Jesus life and Jesus death embodied the love that Jesus understood God to be.

Jesus never taught people what to believe.

Jesus always challenged what people believed.

But Jesus never taught people what to believe.

Jesus embodied the love of God.

Jesus embodied the love that Jesus understood God to be.

Jesus loved his neighbour.

Jesus like the good Jew that he was insisted that we should love God and love our neighbours as we love ourselves and then Jesus took it one step further, one giant step further, Jesus insisted that we should also love our enemies.
LOVE, LOVE, LOVE, that’s what it’s all about!
The life and teachings of Jesus and the death of Jesus are all about love; the love that Jesus had for his neighbours and the love that Jesus had for his enemies. Jesus lived a life that embodied neighbour love and extended the definition of neighbour to include those on the margins. Jesus critiqued his own culture and the culture of his people’s oppressors based on the love of neighbour. And when the religious authorities and the forces of Empire teamed up to persecute Jesus and his neighbours, Jesus refused to take up arms against his enemies choosing instead to insist that only by loving our enemies can we hope to find peace. Jesus proclaimed that peace could only be achieved through justice. Justice based on love of neighbours and love of enemies. Violence is a violation of love and will never lead to peace. Jesus chose to embody love precisely because he understood God as love. Jesus’ embodiment of LOVE was so powerful, that in Jesus people were able to see and experience God. The Jesus experience was so powerful, so life-changing that not even the death of Jesus could kill the experience of LOVE that his followers encountered in the life of Jesus. Love, love, love, that’s what it’s all about.

Our text this morning from what is known as the first letter of John was written at the beginning of the second century. We do not know who wrote this letter. We do know that it was not someone who was alive during Jesus’ lifetime. Scholars believe that it may have been written to a community in Syria. Some 70 years after Jesus of Nazareth walked the earth. The Jesus experience continued to speak powerfully to the followers of Jesus who continued to share that experience with others. That they chose to tell the story of Jesus life and death in ways that would have resonated with the people of their time should come as no surprise to us. Sacrifice, booth animal and human were part and parcel of the religious traditions of the Hellenistic world in which the followers of Jesus lived. That the followers of Jesus tried to make sense out of Jesus execution as a common criminal, in terms of cultic sacrifice is not surprising. That all these centuries later we continue to try to make sense out of Jesus execution as a common criminal, in terms of cultic sacrifice is astounding. That we all too often focus on cultic sacrifice at the expense of love, is in and of itself criminal.

Over the course of the next few weeks, we are going to explore the problems inherent in the predominant ways in which the church continues to promote what is know known as the theory of atonement at the expense of love. We spend some time looking at the history of atonement theory so that we can understand how we got here. But more importantly we are going to look at the other ways Christians over the centuries have tried to make sense out of the life and death of Jesus that can help us move beyond the notion that Jesus was sacrificed for our sins. We are also going to engage in a process which in the style of our ancestors in faith will help us to do what Christians have always done and that is find ways to articulate the love which Jesus embodied which speak to our time and our needs; as well as our hopes and our dreams. For too long we have sacrificed LOVE on the altar of theories about God which are far too small to even begin to encompass the love that God is. It is time to put away our childish, primitive notions of cultic sacrifice, and open ourselves to the power of the LOVE which Christ embodied.

Now I know that it is Springtime and most of us have our sights set on summer, so this may not be a good time to begin such a study. But our neighbours and our enemies are suffering. Nepal,
Baltimore, Syria, First Nations, Iran, Iraq, Yemen, the United States, Toronto, Newmarket, you name the place and there you will find neighbours, friends, loved ones, and enemies all in desperate need of love. Despite the church inability and indeed our unwillingness to move beyond archaic ways of expressing the LOVE that is God, I believe that we are uniquely placed to embody the love that can still be experienced in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The love that we can experience in Christ has so much to offer our world if we but dare to follow wherever it might lead us.

We are as our Bishop is always reminding us the richest Christians who have ever walked the earth. Our vast wealth is beyond the comprehension of the people who have gone before us. We are rich in possessions, but we are also rich in knowledge. Every day we are learning so much about what it means to be human, about the expansive cosmos in which we live, and about the very nature of reality. We are uniquely placed to explore what lies beyond the comprehension of those who have gone before us in faith.

The dimensions and the power of love deserve more than the speculations of our past or the sentimental, self-serving notions of our present age. LOVE, the LOVE that is God, deserves our attention in the here and now. Beloved, let us love one another because love is of God. If we have any hope of learning to love our neighbours and our enemies we will need to understand more fully the magnitude of the LOVE that is God so that we might begin to truly embody that LOVE. This will require that we step up and pay attention to how we arrived at a place where love can be wrapped up in guilt and confused with human sacrifice, so that we can shake off our childish notions and grow into all that we are created to be. LOVE, LOVE, LOVE, that’s what its all about. Everybody scream and shout, because LOVE’s what it’s all about.

LOVE Beyond measure. Beyond words, beyond race, beyond religion, beyond tribe, beyond fear, beyond time, beyond sentimentality, beyond borders, beyond reason, beyond emotion, beyond imagining. Love, beyond the beyond and beyond that also. LOVE. That’s what it’s all about.

LOVE, LOVE, LOVE, that’s what its all about.
Every body scream and shout,
because LOVE’s what it’s all about.
LOVE Beyond measure.
Beyond words, beyond race, beyond religion,
beyond tribe, beyond fear, beyond time,
beyond sentimentality, beyond borders, beyond reason,
beyond emotion, beyond imagining.
Love, beyond the beyond and beyond that also. LOVE.
That’s what it’s all about.

God who is,
LOVE, BELOVED, and LOVE itself. Amen.