

“A BODY IN MY LOVE”

Sermon Preached by the Rev. William H. Critzman

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Scripture References: Acts 10:44-48 & John 15:9-17

Many of you know that I have a dog, two actually, but one in particular that I want to say a few words about this morning. Pink—so named because the rescue agency where she was born and from which I adopted her had tied a different colored strand of yarn around the necks of each of her litter’s fourteen puppies—has been with me for well over thirteen years. When people ask me what sort of dog she is, I typically reply “a dog dog,” or “a black and brown one.” She’s about 60 pounds, comes up to my knee, and from time to time still thinks she’s my lap dog. I could go on all morning with stories, and my phone is full of photos I can’t resist showing if asked. I met Pink and her siblings when they were five weeks old. After sitting on the ground playing with them all, I had my choices narrowed down to two finalists—Pink, and a dog known then as Black & White. Let me tell you this, there are few things as joyous as playing with five week old puppies, but choosing between them isn’t easy. Thankfully, Pink chose me. When I got up to speak to the agency’s staff before leaving, baby Pink followed me across the lawn and nudged the back of my leg. They’re called puppy dog eyes for a reason, so how could I not look down and say, “all right, you win.” I returned three weeks later once the litter was weaned and took Pink home to my San Francisco apartment just after Christmas. She’s been my constant companion ever since. She’s seen everything. We’ve travelled and hiked and swam together. We’re never without a tennis ball or two close at hand, and she wears a double strand of costume pearls whenever we host a party. She knows my secrets and is my daily reminder of what it means to care for creation. Pink is a good dog, you’ll forgive me if I say the best of dogs, and she has given me a gift of untold joy.

You’ve gathered by now that Pink is no spring chicken, and I’ve been thinking a lot recently about the particular blessing that is caring for an older dog. Pink doesn’t hear so well any more these days, so we’ve been reviewing some basic hand signals not just for commands but also to convey emotion. Where I once would have used my voice to praise or love or greet, we now use a wave similar to the ASL sign for applause. Pink’s caught on and will now wag her tail in enthusiastic response. The arthritis in her back legs is pretty bad, and I know it’s hard getting up and down; when she does need a boost those same puppy dog eyes still work on me. She’s not sleeping as soundly through the night as she once did—which of us are?—though her napping has become more intense—lucky dog. One of the things that we’ve noticed and really love is how our other dog—Mr. Hazel, so that you know—who is much younger and much more energetic has taken to looking after her. He checks her out every morning, helps to get her attention when she’s out of sight, and now when she knows that he’s barking, she barks too. She may be old, but she’s not dumb, and I think she trusts him. They’re a good pair; I think they make good friends.

Many of you have dogs and cats and all sorts of other pets I’ve had a chance to meet from time to time as well. Along with baptizing children and sharing the Lord’s Supper, aside from worshipping and teaching and learning with you, right up there with celebrating Christmas and Easter in my book of favorite things to do here at First Church is our annual Blessing of the Animals service. Many of you have been here for that service, worshipping right along with your four legged, or a picture of your four legged, or in some cases stuffed animals or this past year’s plastic barnyard toys. That service ends with the pastors spending individual time with

each of you and your pets offering a short prayer and blessing. It's a joyful time here, and I know it can also be a hard time too. I know the deep grief that can come when a long time friend proves the rule that all dogs go to heaven. I know some of the ashes that have secretly found their ways to our church yard. I've talked with at least one of you about how I think of getting through those days. It might be a bit corny, but when I think about Pink going ahead to meet the Good Shepherd before me, I like to imagine the day when I'll arrive at the pearly gates. I like to think that in that moment when St. Peter says "welcome" and Jesus says my name, Pink will come bounding out of those gates, leading the pack of all my beloveds who claim their rest before I do, and there, there in that moment, my joy will be complete.

When I think of God and God's great imagination that surpasses all human understanding, sometimes I find it helpful to think of our pets and how different they are from us. They know not what we do when we leave the apartment, but we know their comings and goings. We know when they need to go to the vet, we feed them and groom them, we walk with them and care for them and love them, and yet we know that our minds surpass their understanding. They trust us, they rely on us, they love us too. I think of Jesus the Good Shepherd who cares for each of us, leading us to still waters and green pastures. I think of God the Creator still creating and still naming creation as good. I think of the Holy Spirit who loves a good surprise, who never abandons, and who loves to laugh with us. What one dog, what many dogs or cats, may be like to one of us, so might all of creation be to God. In the diversity and magnitude of all of us, there might be God's delight, God's deep joy.

God so loved the world, the Gospel of John tells us, that Jesus came to know us better. Jesus knew a thing or two about love. In the post-Easter story we remember this morning, Jesus tells the disciples that just as God loves him, he shall love all of us. For our sake, Jesus has kept the God of Abraham and Sarah's commandments; he has followed the law of Moses and Miriam; in his life he kept the covenant between God and the Israelites that still exists. It is because of this love between God and Jesus that Jesus's joy is complete, and he lives, redeems, and sustains from within that love. He abides in God's love. And from that place of love, which Jesus names as joy, he invites us in. Christ calls to all of us to join in the love of God through the same transitive property that allows Word to become flesh, God to become human, humans to be known to God. This knowing that comes through love is deep, fulsome, and filled with joy for all of us.

St. Peter knows a thing or two about boundless love as well, perhaps this is why he's entrusted as head greeter at the pearly gates. The post-Easter story we hear from the book of Acts is a good example of the Spirit's love of surprises. In it, the Spirit comes to all who are gathered—Jew and Gentile, men and women, young and old, baptized and not. Maybe this doesn't surprise us today, but trust me when I tell you that to Peter and to the other apostles, this was surprising indeed—"astounding" is the word our English translation uses. It seems that when you begin with love, when you approach the seemingly impossible with joy, God intervenes and proves once and again that God's love knows no bounds.

Jesus tells us to abide in this love: abide in this love so that your joy may be complete. Jesus gives this commandment here in the Gospel of John; it is a singular commandment that all the other laws and gospel hang upon: love. Abide in Christ's love as Jesus abides in God's, and all of us can and will know complete joy. "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." Abide in this love, Jesus says. Live in it. Love in it. Share it.

In a few moments, we will gather ourselves together around this table. We name it as a communion table, or the table of welcome, or the Lord's Table, and all of these names are true. We will gather at Christ's invitation to follow Jesus's instruction. We will gather in love to share in the body and blood of Christ, a body that is given in love. A body in Christ's love. Together at this table there is a mystery that does indeed occur, for in our gathering, in our abiding in Jesus's love, we become a body in Jesus's love. All of us—many members, white and black, men and women, young and old—all of us come together as one as the Spirit falls afresh upon all of us. Is this a surprise? Will we be astounded? Are we capable of such awe, or even interested in such surprises? Abiding in God's love, are you ready to be a body—a church, a community, a city—living in God's love? Are you ready for, and do you want, joy?

I am. I'll tell you that I am ready to abide in God's love so that my joy may be complete. I'd love for us all to be there together. I'd love for all of us to no longer be servants, but to be friends. That whatever holds us captive, to whatever old ways of being or chains that bind us to old ways of thinking, that we all may be free. Free from unhealthy ways of living; free from whatever addictions or habits hold each of us enslaved. Free from the strains of racism and sexism and homophobia. Free from the tyranny of bad theology or any religion that expresses anything other than love in an extreme way. Free from debt, sharing in abundance. Free from failure, ready to thrive. Free from hate, abiding in love.

There is no greater love than the love between friends when one is willing to lay down their life for the other. To lay down, to lay, to lay down with, to lay down arms, to lay a table, to be a body—a body in Christ's love. "Friends," he said, "for that is what I call you. Abide in my love." "Take, eat, this is my body, abide in it," that's his invitation at the table. "Remember me," he says as he prepares to lay down his life for his friends, for all of us friends. Why? So that we may be a body abiding in love—love of God, love of Jesus, love of all creation. Use whatever reminders you need, but remember this: you are loved, and God offers nothing less than complete joy. Come to the table and remember that we are the body of Christ. Go from this place remembering that creation is God's delight. Wave to a dog. Help where you can. Abide in the body of love so that your joy—whatever that is to you—may be complete. And when it is, do as Jesus says: bear fruit, fruit that will last and sustain and nourish. Do what brings joy, do it all from love, and bear fruit. Bear and bring fruit because friends, the world is hungry. Hungry for the body of Christ. Hungry to abide in love.