

HOW DO I LOVE THEE?

By Rev. Will Nelken

Presented at Trinity Community Church, San Rafael, California, on Sunday, June 5, 2011

*How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.
I love thee to the level of everyday's
Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.
I love thee freely, as men strive for Right;
I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise.
I love thee with a passion put to use
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints, — I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears, of all my life! — and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death.*
(Elizabeth Barrett Browning)

Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote many poems, like the one above, stirred by her faith in God — a religious intensity she once described as "not the deep persuasion of the mild Christian but the wild visions of an enthusiast."

This poem speaks of the multi-faceted expressions of love and worship which God inspired in her: deep, settled, free, pure, passionate, whole-hearted, eternal.

Today, we have shared together in the Table of the Lord. One of the ideas clearly embedded in the service of Holy Communion is love — the love that Jesus has shown to the Father and the love He has shown to us. The first is an expression of obedience, and the second, of compassion.

Jesus said, "*I will do what the Father requires of me, so that the world will know that I love the Father.*" (John 14:31)

Raw obedience may express things other than love (fear, slavishness, compulsion), but it is plain to most people when obedience does spring from love, from a healthy desire to please and to honor.

What Jesus did to express His love for the Father was not a matter of fearfulness — He was not threatened by His Father.

Nor was it a matter of slavishness, as though He had no choice but to comply.

Nor was His obedience a matter of compulsiveness, but of utter freedom and wholesome devotion. He came, He lived, He served, He died — because He loved the Father unceasingly.

That Jesus loved *us* in His mission is equally plain, by the compassion He showed for the lost and undone.

On one occasion, when He saw the crowds following Him, "*He had compassion on them, because they were confused and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.*" (Matthew 9:36)

On other occasions, Jesus touched outcast lepers, healed the blind and the crippled that others ignored, delivered the demonized of their tormentors, comforted the bereaved by raising their dead to life, ministered to the marginalized who were caught in a web of sin.

This is the Jesus with whom we commune: obedient and compassionate (loving His Heavenly Father and displaying His Father's love).

This, then, is what we should draw from our communion with Him: that same love for the Father and compassion for our fallen fellows.

Jesus said, *"Those who accept my commandments and obey them are the ones who love me. And because they love me, my Father will love them. And I will love them and reveal myself to each of them."* (John 14:21)

We are those who obey God — not because we are afraid of judgment to come, for our judgment is already past (Jesus was judged in our place and for our sins) — because we love Him, for He first loved us.

We obey Him, not in slavish compliance, because we are not compelled by external force; we have been chosen, invited, and empowered. It is our choice of love.

And not from a rabid inner drivenness (some dark compulsion from which we have no escape), but because we want to, we find joy in obeying God.

We will still be tempted to do otherwise — for the sake of convenience or comfort, self-absorption or self-preservation. And, of this we have been warned:

"Do not love this world nor the things it offers you, for when you love the world, you do not have the love of the Father in you. For the world offers only a craving for physical pleasure, a craving for everything we see, and pride in our achievements and possessions. These are not from the Father, but are from this world." (1 John 2:15-16)

So we carefully avoid those "things of the world" that stir our cravings and turn from those things that threaten to divert our attention from the One we love. As Paul urged, *"Keep your mind on things above, not on worldly things."* (Colossians 3:2)

We should also draw from our communion with Christ more of His compassion for those around us, especially those who are in difficulty and disregarded by the world.

Jesus said, *"You must be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate."* (Luke 6:36)

This compassion is the antithesis of our natural selfishness; it is imparted by God only as a result of our frequent communion with Him. Most anyone can learn to do what we call "acts of compassion," but the genuine motivation comes not by nature or by learning but by the grace of God. For this is the compassion that willingly *sacrifices* self (comfort, standing, or freedom) in order to benefit someone else.

Paul had this clearly in mind when he urged us: *"So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you."* (Colossians 3:12-13)

We may discover a natural inclination to help someone who is in need, but the stronger proclivity toward self-preservation will turn us away, *unless* Christ is at work in us with His overcoming compassion.

What do you take away from communion with the Lord? Whether at the Lord's Supper, or in your private place of prayer, are you changed?

Do you repent more freely? Is your resolve to obey increased?

Are you more aware of God and of others? Is your spirit gentler and kinder?

Today, I invite you to an altar of communion. We have eaten of the bread and drunk the from the cup. We have heard the Word. Now, let us respond in personal prayer, surrendering our selfish hearts to God again, and drawing from Him deeper obedience and wider compassion. Will you take a few minutes right now to pray?

May God bless your heart with renewed strength and joy!