

Sermon for the Sixth Sunday of Easter, April 6, 2018

Solemn Mass

By the Reverend James Ross Smith

*Year B: Acts 11:19–30; Psalm 33:1–8; 1 John 4:7–21; John 15:9–17*

In 1993, when I was living in New Haven, Connecticut, studying church history and working at Christ Church, a parish near the Yale campus, a woman named Marilyn McCord Adams joined the faculty at the Divinity School. Marilyn was a priest and, not long after she moved to New Haven, she joined the staff at Christ Church as a part-time assistant. It was there that I got to know her.

Marilyn was serious and ascetic in appearance. She was careful in the way she spoke, but she didn't cultivate a professorial manner. She was kind, and the parishioners liked her, as did I. She had a distinctive way of preaching. Her sermons were carefully prepared and written out, but she didn't bring her manuscript with her into the pulpit. She always memorized the text of her sermons and delivered them in a logical, well-argued manner that was rather hypnotic. She didn't raise her voice or use a lot of gestures. She was *not* a Baptist. She was very kind to me, to José, and to the other members of the staff. She and her husband, Bob Adams, who had come to Yale

as the chairman of the Philosophy Department, had us to dinner several times in their large home not far from New Haven. Marilyn was a very good cook and a welcoming hostess. I liked visiting her there and I found her easy to talk to. She often spoke about her years in Los Angeles, where she'd taught at UCLA. She talked about her call to ordained ministry. And she talked about her work with people with AIDS in the 1980s, an experience that had clearly shaped her views on many things, including faith, sexuality, suffering, marriage, death and dying, homophobia, and the redemptive power of love. She also talked about gardening, and food, and cooking. She was an interesting woman, and those are the ways in which I first got to know her.

In 1993, I had finished my coursework and I seldom traveled up the hill to the Divinity School. I never studied with Marilyn. And so, I only slowly discovered that she was one of the smartest people that I'd ever met. Marilyn was a philosopher and theologian. She specialized in medieval philosophy. She wrote what has been described as the "definitive two-volume

study of William Ockham”<sup>1</sup> (not reading for the beach). At the Div School, she taught courses on Aquinas and Bonaventure. She didn’t like Saint Bernard of Clairvaux because, she thought, he’d been cruel to Peter Abelard. She left Yale in 2004 to become the first woman and the first American to hold the Regius professorship of divinity at Oxford. She is perhaps best known for two books on the problem of evil.<sup>2</sup> I have tried to read those books, but they have mostly defeated me. In them, she uses the vocabulary and methods of modern analytical philosophy. Insofar as I understand those books, she is taking on the classical atheist argument that a God who is good could not, and would not, allow evil, the death of the innocent, or horrible suffering. In response, she doesn’t argue that God allows evil to preserve human free will. Rather, she argues that it is possible for positive meanings to be found in the relationship between God and those who are suffering. And it turns out that she began to develop

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<sup>1</sup> Adams, Robert, Obituary of Marilyn McCord Adams, *The Guardian*, March 31, 2017.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/31/marilyn-mccord-adams>.

Accessed July 10, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Adams, Marilyn McCord, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Cornell Studies in the Philosophy of Religion) (Cornell University Press, 2000); *Christ and Horrors: The Coherence of Christology* (Current Issues in Theology 4) (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

those ideas not in the lecture halls of Oxford or Yale, but in the hospitals where she had found herself preaching to men who three weeks later were going to die of AIDS. And so, in those relentlessly logical and, to me, impenetrable books, she allows herself to talk about redemption, about Jesus, and about love.

In this morning's second reading, John says that God is love,<sup>3</sup> which is a wonderful, but if you think about it, a somewhat abstract sort of thing to say. It is a statement that helped Saint Augustine, another philosopher-theologian, to argue that the Holy Spirit is the love that exists between the Father and the Son, which is another lovely idea, but also, it seems to me, a rather impersonal one. The First Letter of John is not really a letter. It's more of an essay, or a sermon. And it's probably not written by the apostle John, the son of Zebedee, but by a follower of Jesus,<sup>4</sup> who was also a follower of the disciple who wrote the Gospel of John. He knew John's gospel very well. And so, he knew Jesus' words, the ones we just heard, "This I command you, to love one another."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> 1 John 4:8

<sup>4</sup> He probably did not know Jesus during Jesus' ministry.

<sup>5</sup> 1 John 4:21

In this part of his sermon, John is getting a bit philosophical, though he isn't a philosopher. It's as if he's trying to define the word "love." That's why he says, "God is love." And one of the reasons all this matters to him is because he's trying to be a good pastor to a community where some pretty unloving things have taken place.<sup>6</sup> There's been a schism in the community, and the rupture has been a painful one. In this community, an argument has been going on about who Jesus was and is—was he really human, did he truly die (John says "yes")—and it's an important argument, but, still, things have gotten ugly, and so John wants to talk about love, maybe to try and figure out how things could have gone so wrong, to pick up the pieces so his people could obey Jesus' command to love one another, and to keep love from turning into hate. And so, he says, "God is love." But he knows that's not enough. Love is not just a concept. True, it's a gift from God, it starts with God. God is the origin of love—"We love," he says, "because God first loved us"<sup>7</sup>—but taking refuge in talk about God isn't enough. For love to be love it can't just be something between me and God and nobody else. That's just an

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<sup>6</sup> See Brown, Raymond, *The Epistles of John*, Anchor Bible 30 (Doubleday & Co., 1982), 69–115.

<sup>7</sup> 1 John 4:19

evasion, John seems to be saying. And so, he says, “If any one says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother or sister whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen.”<sup>8</sup> And so, it seems, for John, love is not just a comforting word that can be claimed but not put into practice. For John, love is always an *action*. It’s never just words. And the reason John believes this is because of Jesus, because of what God is doing in *Jesus*, “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.”<sup>9</sup> That’s what love is, John says, God’s sending his son into this beautiful but painful world; it is Jesus; his life, his work, his ministry, but also his dying, his confronting the things that matter most—evil and sin and death—and becoming a sacrifice for the sake of the world.<sup>10</sup> And for John this is love in action and what love must always be. He has heard Jesus’ words—“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends”<sup>11</sup>—and taken them to heart. Perhaps not literally. He is no fanatic. He’s not promoting martyrdom. And, it’s true, he can’t quite work his way

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<sup>8</sup> 1 John 4:20

<sup>9</sup> 1 John 4:9

<sup>10</sup> John 3:16ff

<sup>11</sup> John 15:13

towards reconciling with those “who have gone out from us.” But, still, this he knows: God is love. Love is source and origin and truth. And he knows this not just as words but as deeds—God shows who he is by sending Jesus. And Jesus tells us what to do. He tells us to love.

Marilyn McCord Adams died last year. I always admired her, and I’m sorry that she is gone. Preaching in her presence was a frightening thing, because I could never be as logical or as smart as she was. But that never seemed to matter to her. She didn’t use her intelligence as a weapon. What she’d learned in those hospital rooms in Los Angeles, what she’d learned from Jesus, is that love is not just talk. It is a force, a kind of energy. It is a moving, active, caring, fixing, consoling, mending sort of thing. It’s not about being first. It’s finding a way to keep on loving even if people don’t like you, and even if they hate you.

I read this week, in sources both Jewish and Christian, that in Hebrew thought the interior of the body, the intestines, but also the heart, is where emotions take place. But it is also the seat of the intellect. Thought and feeling are not so separate and distinct. I like that. I like to imagine that’s what Jesus thought, and Saint

John, too. And I think that's what Marilyn, philosopher and disciple of Jesus, was trying to put into action—to think of mind as both thought and feeling, reason and emotion, logic and action. The idea of a godless world made no sense to her because of the existence of love. I don't know that she was a saint. I doubt that she was “perfected in love” any more than any of us are. But she'd learned Saint John's great truth and it's a truth she wanted to share: love is God acting in the world because God is love. And that love is not just a thing to watch or witness from afar. It is a thing to be reckoned with, a force that insists that only love in action is truly love. Loving a sister or a brother, Saint John says, calms our fears because it brings us into the presence of God. It helps us, at last, to know the meaning of those lovely, abstract words “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them.”

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,  
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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