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**Love Renews the World**  
(Dt 7:6-14a / Ps 149 / Eph 1:11-23 / Lk 6:27-36)

*In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Love renews the world – this is the last in our series of reflections on the Christian virtues: wisdom, self-control, justice, courage, goodness, faith, hope, and now finally love. It's fitting that love has the final word, because love sums up, love recapitulates, all the virtues.

Jesus said: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.

Love sums up all the Law and the Prophets – all the virtues.

Paul tells us that, in the end, only faith, hope, and love – these three theological virtues – remain; and the greatest of these is love.

John, the Beloved Apostle, delivers the gospel message that we have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another (cf 1 John 3:11). Love has the first word, and love has the last word; it is the alpha and the omega of the Christian virtues. Love renews the world.

Well, of course it does, and everyone knows it. We knew it in the 1960s when Burt Bacharach and Hal David wrote the song, "What the world needs now is love, sweet love. That's the only thing that there's just too little of." And the Beatles, around the same time, gave us the beautiful and complex lyrics:

All you need is love  
All you need is love

All you need is love, love  
Love is all you need

The 1960s was the decade of love – and of the assassinations of John Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bobby Kennedy. In the 1960s hippies and flower children sang about and marched for love while the rest of the world watched the increasing body count from the Viet Nam war on the nightly news. Love renews the world.

Well, of course it does, and we've all experienced it. Every time someone start a discussion with “Now you know I love you, but,” well, you just know you are about to be renewed. And there is the equally renewing, “If you really loved me you would [fill in the blank].” How many women, I wonder and shudder to think, have heard men tell them again and again, “I'm sorry. It will never happen again. You know I love you.” Love renews the world.

Well, of course it does, and everyone knows it. We even have a day on the calendar set aside specifically to celebrate love, because love renews the world. You know the day I mean, don't you: Valentine's Day, February 14th? Because we all know that lingerie, chocolate, and badly written cards have the power to renew the world. I'm sorry, beloved, but Valentine's Day as we celebrate it has absolutely nothing to do with love. It has to everything to do with romance, that slightly insane emotional state triggered by the neurotransmitters adrenalin, serotonin, and by dopamine, which is also stimulated by cocaine and nicotine. Now, I have nothing against romance. As old as I am, I think I even remember it, and, as I recall, it was quite pleasant. But it's not love, and it doesn't renew the world. It is chemicals and emotions. It renews not the world but the coffers and the bottom lines of Victoria's Secret, Godiva Chocolatiers, florists galore, Hallmark and Walgreen's, where all men end up late on Valentine's evening trying desperately to buy the card and chocolate they've forgotten. Love renews the world.

Fr. Jack is probably getting a bit nervous about now, possibly repenting that he asked me to preach this final sermon on love. So, let me set his mind at rest by putting the record straight: I am not nearly as cynical as all this makes me sound. The world is deeply broken and grown old, and needs renewal. Humankind is deeply broken and grown old, and needs renewal. And, I do believe that love – and only love – renews the world. I simply believe that the world has little concept of the *kind* of love that could and does and yet will renew it.

The love that renews the world really is hiding in plain sight right there on the calendar, just not on February 14th. We have not one day devoted to the celebration of renewing love, but three days – Christmas, Good Friday, Easter – because it takes these three days to tell love's story. Foreigner sang, “I want to know what love is, I want you to show me.” Well, here is God's answer.

Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men [Christmas]. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross [Good Friday]. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father [Easter – with Ascension and the last great day thrown in for good measure], (Phil 2:5b-11).

All of this, the whole Gospel story from beginning to end – incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection – all of it is God's love in action to renew the world. So, yes, love renews the world: not our love, but God's love. God's love renews the world.

It has been so from the beginning of redemptive history, from God's choice of Israel to be the instrument of renewal to this very day. In today's Old Testament lesson, Israel is camped on the plains of Moab, poised to enter the promised land after forty years of wandering in the wilderness. Their world is being renewed: from slavery to freedom, from exile to homecoming, from Pharaoh to Moses and soon to Joshua, from idols (false gods) to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And in his final address to the people, Moses wants them to know what it is – who it is – that is renewing their world.

For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you (Dt 7:6-8a).

It is because the LORD *loves you*. God's love renews the world. Time and again throughout Israel's history, God's love renewed their world.

When Israel entered the land, conquered large portions of it, and grew complacent, they

...did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals. And they abandoned the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. They went after other gods from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed down to them. And they provoked the LORD to anger. They abandoned the LORD and served the Baals and Ashtaroath. So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he gave them over to plunderers, who plundered them. And he sold them into the hand

of their surrounding enemies...And they were in terrible distress (Judges 2:11-14b, 15b).

And when Israel came to her senses, put away her false gods, and called upon the Name of the LORD, he heard their cry, and in love, renewed their world by raising up Judges to deliver them. God's love renews the world.

Later, when Israel rejected God and cried out for a king to be like the surrounding nations, God gave them Saul, the desire of their hearts. And when King Saul proved faithless, God, in his love, chose a king after his own heart – David – to renew the kingdom, the world. God's love renews the world.

When David's royal successors in Judah and a series of upstart kings in Israel led the people astray – into idolatry, into social injustice – God, in his love, raised up prophets to renew the world by speaking convicting truth, by warning of judgment, by pleading for the divided kingdoms to return to the LORD. God's love renews the world – if we listen, if we obey.

When Israel and Judah refused to heed the prophets, God raised up conquerors – Assyria and Babylonia – and delivered his people over to exile. Even this too, was born of God's love, because sometimes renewal requires judgment and purification. One way or another, God's love renews the world.

When the days of exile were fulfilled, God, in his love, raised up a foreign king and put it into the king's heart to allow God's people to return to Judah, to restore Jerusalem, to rebuild the temple – to renew their world. God's love renews the world.

And, in the fullness of time, God, in his love, chose Mary, a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David (cf Lk 1:27). God chose Mary to be the instrument through whom – in love – he would come into the world himself to renew the world – once for all: not just Israel, but all creation. Mary sang of this renewal, though she could not know its full measure. She sang of it as if it were already accomplished:

He has mercy on those who fear him  
in every generation.  
He has shown the strength of his arm,  
he has scattered the proud in their conceit.  
He has cast down the mighty from their thrones,  
and has lifted up the lowly.  
He has filled the hungry with good things,  
and the rich he has sent away empty.  
He has come to the help of his servant Israel,

for he has remembered his promise of mercy,  
The promise he made to our father,  
to Abraham and his children for ever (BCP 119).

And John echoes the theme:

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory,  
glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14).

In the incarnation, God steps into creation – becomes part of creation – to renew the world.

But, just as with Israel, true renewal of the world requires judgment and purification. The sin that defiles and deforms and destroys the world must be condemned and conquered before the world can be renewed. And so this one about whom Mary sang, this Word made flesh, took upon himself the burden of every sin committed from the Garden to the farthest reaches of the future, and judged and destroyed it by his own death.

At the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die – but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Rom 5:6b-8).

In the crucifixion, God, in the person of Jesus Christ, died to renew the world .

But, in a renewed world, death cannot have the final word. In the renewed world, death itself must die. Dying *to* sin, dying *for* sin is not enough.

Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be *saved by his life*. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation (Rom 5:9-11).

Saved by his life: early on the morning of the first day of the week, God, in the person of Jesus Christ, rises again to renew the world. God's love renews the world: Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection.

God's love renews the world by renewing his image bearers. God's love renews you, as many as are in Christ Jesus.

See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. Beloved, we are God's children now and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure (1 John 3:1*a*, 2-3).

God's love renews the world by renewing his image bearers. God's love renews you, as many as are in Christ Jesus.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold the new has come (2 Cor 5:17).

God's love renews the world, yes, but even more. God's love creates a new world, a new creation in which the old – sin, separation, sorrow, death itself – has passed away and something new has come. The world is not simply returned to what it was before; we are not simply returned to what we were before. God's love does not merely reset the clock; it moves the hands forward to a new time (a new *kairos*) – a new time already present, though not yet fully realized.

We are even now living in God's new time, in God's new creation, as God's new people: delivered from evil, brought out of error into truth, out of sin into righteousness, out of death into life. In Christ we have been born again and united to the communion of saints, which we remember this All Saints' Sunday. This is our renewal. This is our re-creation.

So, we pray in the collect of All Saints' Day:

Almighty God, you have knit together your elect in one communion and fellowship in the mystical body of your Son Christ our Lord: Give us grace so to follow your blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living, that we may come to those ineffable joys that you have prepared for those who truly love you.

And, in this collect, we come full circle to the virtues: wisdom, self-control, justice, courage, goodness, faith, hope, and love. Because God's love has renewed the world, because God's love has renewed us, we are now called to virtuous and godly living – and not only called, but empowered by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, “because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom 5:5*b*). It is not our love which renews the world; it is God's love. It is not our task to renew the world. God, and God alone, can and is doing that. But it is our task to live virtuous and godly lives as God's renewed people in God's renewed world. It is our task to let our light so shine before others, that they may see our good works and give glory to our Father who is in heaven (cf Mt 5:16). It is our task to present our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God; to refuse to

be conformed to this world, but rather to be transformed by the renewal of our minds; to test and discern and do that good and acceptable and perfect will of God (cf Rom 12:1-2). It is our task – our hope and calling and privilege – to be God's renewed people in God's renewed world, to bear witness to the great good news that, in Christ, God's love renews the world.

So, we press on to make the virtues our own. By opening our hearts to receive the renewing love of God, we are loved by God into the virtues, into godly and virtuous living, for such is pleasing to God. We press deeper into the fear of God, for that is the beginning of wisdom. We yield self-control to Spirit control. We pursue God's restorative justice in the Church and in the world. We grow strong and courageous, for God is with us and will never leave us. We show forth goodness by showing mercy and forgiveness. We cultivate a faith which is defiant against all the assaults of the world, the flesh, and the devil, knowing that he who is in us is greater than he who is in the world. We stir up hope – sometimes hope against hope – for our hope in Christ is sure and will not disappoint. And we bind all these virtues together with the love that called them into being, with the love that will bring them to perfection, with the love of God that renews his people and renews the world, with a love that is patient and kind, with a love that does not envy or boast and is not arrogant or rude or domineering or irritable or resentful, with a love that rejoices in truth, bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things (cf 1 Cor 13:4-7) – with a love that renews the world.

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another (John 13:34-35).

Love renews the world. Amen.