Pastor's Pen: God is Love

While out in Utah, I started to write my next book. I have long wanted to tap into the deep-set intensity I have had now for several years about the nature of a parish. I know this will come as no shock to most of you. I am passionate about this. Finding a starting point was difficult. That is the thing about explaining why we are passionate about what we are passionate about: finding the right words to explain the genesis of what started the passion and why for years, it still burns so fiercely. For several days I had to really pray and reflect in a way that only walking in the kind of awe-inspiring trails of the high country of Utah can provide. I understand why the Scriptures tell us Jesus went up on mountains to pray.

It came and just stuck in my mind on one of those hikes. Three simple words taken from I John 4: God is love. I was on top of a mountain called Brian Head. It was a little over 11,000 feet in altitude and the views from the top stretched for more miles than I could imagine. From this one vantage point, I could see rain falling miles away from where I stood. I could see patches of sun and clouds scattered across the landscape. From that single vantage point, there seemed to be a union. That is when it clicked -- there is one single vantage point from which all of Christianity made sense and is that single defining quality is the love of God which, as St. John tells us, is who He is. At that moment, the heart of what defines a parish was clear. As with all things in our faith, a parish finds its mission, its identity, and its fulfillment in the love of God.

It was that love that drew me back to the Church in my mid-twenties. I remember a song from my youth, "In Your Eyes" by Peter Gabriel, that awoke in me a desire for something beyond myself. I wanted a place of identity I could not find in the world. One of the lyrics says, "In your eyes, the resolution of all the fruitless searches. Oh I see the light and the heat (in your eyes), Oh I want to feel that complete. I want to touch the light, the heat I see in your eyes." It occurred to me that the light and heat which stem from the darkness and confusion of a chaotic world could be found alone in the eyes of God who is love. In that love, lies the completeness we strive for. It fills the God-shaped hole in our souls. It is the longing of which St. Augustine spoke when he said, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

This, my brothers and sisters, is the core of who we are and what we offer as a parish. Just reflect on that for a second. We offer the healing and fulfilling love of God in a weary and confusing world. It is a love expressed most perfectly by the self-emptying love of Jesus Christ shown in the Eucharist. It is the love displayed in its perfection on the Cross. It is a love that finds its zenith in the resurrection. It is a love which lifts to heaven in the Ascension. It is a love that binds and fills us with a dignity and warmth that cannot be filled by the things of this world. As I have said many times, our parishes are not businesses that offer goods and services. If we see our identity in the love of God, then such a belief is vulgar and demeaning. No, we are family bound by the love of God, recreated and given a new identity so that we might give witness to God's love and so draw others who are seeking the answer to all the fruitless searches that weigh down life.

Our sacraments only make sense in light of the love of God. Learning about faith must be more than just memorizing facts and dates. We aren't merely called to know about the love of God but to know the love of God. We are called into a familial covenant that binds us, heals us, restores us, and fulfills us. Our actions as a parish, whether to each other or to the world at large, must find the love of God as its nucleus. When Jesus gave the great Commission at the end of the Gospel of Matthew -- to make disciples of the nations -- He wasn't sending us out as salespeople in a Ponzi scheme to secure wealth and prestige. No, He sent us out flowing from His own love of all humanity and His love of the Father's will (also bound in eternal love) to draw all into that same covenant love relationship.

When Bishop McKnight calls for parishes to be centers of mercy and charity, is this not what he is asking for? Mercy and charity are the light and the heat that draw those searching and disillusioned into recognizing a safe harbor where their fruitless searches might find resolution. When the bishop asks us to be places of the Beatitudes, is this not what he is asking for? When he redefined "stewardship" to be something much greater than the money grubbing exercise that we cynically defined it to be but instead as something that was the powertrain behind being the safe harbor where the love of God could be found and experienced.

As I am writing this, it came to my mind that this sentiment explains why the apostles wrote powerful letters to the various early Christians churches of their day instructing them to purge from their communities all that was incompatible with the love of God. The desire for power and control, the creation of factions, the blind eyes turned away from sin that brings division, the bickering and selfish desires … all these the apostles warned those communities (and consequently us) to purge so that the love of God could be made crystal clear to those searching.

Power struggles, gossip, bickering, facilitation of sin, and worldliness are antithetical to the love of God. They are poison to a parish and its mission. They cloud vision and dim the light and heat we are called to give witness to. When we allow political and worldly entities to redefine what love is and how it operates, we blockade the entrance to the harbor and leave out in the storm adrift those tempest-tossed and searching. God alone, who is love, defines love. Only His love can fulfill us.

In the next year, I am asking each and every one of us to figuratively go to the top of that mountain and see the unifying force that binds us as a parish: our participation in the love of God. Let it transform us and break down the artificial barriers we erect. Let us by word, action, and priority live that love of God in a way so powerful that it shines like a fiery beacon and draws those searching, confused, and tired of the fruitless searches. Let us intentionally find ways to show that God is indeed love and because we profess to be His children, we strive to be love as well. This is more than a book I am writing, this is the Gospel already written that we are called to powerfully live.