My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Lord of our Eastertide Bodies, Hearts, Souls, and Spirits, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in Your sight, our strength and our Redeemer, Amen.

As a child I grew up singing, “They will know we are Christians by our love, by our love, yes, they’ll knoooow we are Christians by our love.” There was, to my knowledge, no one but Christians where I grew up, so it was a bit of a non sequitur. But we sang it proudly at camp, at youth group, in youth choir. It’s in my bones.

And somehow lots of people along the way in my life knew I’d be a pastor. They knew I was different, that I’d do something great. I always thought that was succeeding in business to find the gold at the end of the rainbow. And somehow after 56 years I’ve ended up here, at CCCG, where I have grown to love you and know that you love me, too. And yet, we disappoint one another.

We are not as strong as we hoped in the face of current events and what we should do in response. We forget the words to the song “We Shall Overcome” and “Amazing Grace” while beating ourselves up about the urgency of now. We can’t bear sermons which tear at our hearts, because those spaces have been taken up by politicians of one side or another, and we want to leave politics out of church, don’t we? We lean on each other, but our energies run thin in imagining the courage it will take to truly become a community church. The two-steps-forward, one-step-back nature of social justice has us treading on each other’s toes, doesn’t it? Time sucks the vigor; lassitude eats the momentum. The get-up-and-go gets up and goes away.

And just when we seem to want to throw up our hands and eyes to the heavens and shout to God, “Really? Can you give me just ONE more burden to bear to see if I’ll break?!?” Into this life of weariness waltzes John, with his letter fluttering ahead of us in the parade, words to summon us to the dance.

“By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments.” The love of God comes first. Oh, yeah, that’s right. Can’t see the forest but for the trees again, can we?

It can be difficult to see love for God. Yes, we sing it in our traditional hymns, and we pray it for folks who we know we should pray for and who need it (not us, God, surely, but others). But love for God is more difficult to see when we’re measuring our faith by our love for humankind. It matters in humankind; it is flesh and blood truth incarnate—but that’s not the depth of love.

The depth of love is measured in something beyond our sight, beyond our energies, a longitude that stretches way beyond our days and a latitude that reaches beyond our deepest conception of here and there. Jesus may be human, but there’s more to God’s love than the love between people.

It’s love for God that motivates us beyond our imperfect, fragile, human faithfulness. When I’m drained it is love for God that energizes me. Well, first it’s love for God in which I rest. Then it’s love for God in which I worship, the reverence and depth and breadth and engulfing embrace around my heart and soul and in my mind and Spirit. Next love for God joins me to the community who love the commandments, the commandments that are no longer burdensome because they are God’s. Later love for God takes me into and beyond my work, beyond what I can do and see, even beyond what I can do and see together with you, you beloved who are fabulous and capable and committed. “For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome.”

This week's Gospel lesson echoes this: Jesus commands his disciples to love one another. The theme of love is prominent in John's Gospel and in the letters of John. What are some of the ways the Apostle John, the Beloved Disciple, writes about love of God? (take all answers). Here’s a few.

1. God so loved the world.

2. God is love.

3. Since God loved us so much, we ought to love each other.

4. Love one another as I have loved you.

Love is the core of the good news about the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus. Although we are exposed to inferior models and descriptions of love at every turn, true love is worth recovering, both in the church and in the culture. For Christians it's about giving, about "laying down one's life for one's friends."

John redefines love as communion, the experience of community. But individualism presents a significant obstacle to community, and as we all awaken from the alone-ness of the COVID pandemic, we risk becoming more, not less, isolated from one another. We’ve had 18 months of practice staying apart, having to take care of ourselves, and that love expressed as hugs, kisses, and holding hands has had to take a backseat.

But it should not—it cannot—stay there for us who follow God. Remember last week? Jesus presents himself as the vine and us as the branches. We are connected, and life flows from the vine into the branches. What is that when our life energy flows outward toward someone else, without any expectation of return? No, this is not a Star Wars quiz. What is it? It’s love, isn’t it? When our lives flow into that of another and we watch that other life bear fruit, just like in the Gospel, it’s love.

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts. On this Mother’s Day, Moms know this instinctually, that their life flows out from them into their children and it’s called…what? Love. You didn’t need my sermon to tell you that, I know. But it’s important for us to understand that beyond the biological family there is a love flow and bond that God and Jesus talk about.

There are no individual, solitary Christians. I cannot be a Christian without you, and you cannot be a Christian without me. God designed it this way. So a part of our conversion is into the communion, the believers, the household of God. Ever heard of Dietrich Bonhoeffer? He was a German theologian who came to America for theological education and then went back to Germany to witness against the Nazi regime by his love of God. He writes from a Nazi prison cell about the communion that we share with each other—and the temptation to take our life together for granted:

It is true that what is an unspeakable gift of God for the lonely individual is easily disregarded by those who have the gift every day. It is easily forgotten that the fellowship of Christian brothers and sisters is a gift of grace, a gift of the Kingdom of God that any day may be taken from us, that the time that still separates us from utter loneliness may be brief indeed. Therefore, let the one who until now has had the privilege of living a common Christian life with other Christians praise God's grace from the bottom of his heart. Let us thank God on our knees and declare: it is grace, nothing but grace that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brothers and sisters.

We are thankful this day for God who created our lives, our church who sustains it, and most of all our mothers who birthed us into life so that we can understand what love means each and every day.

Thanks be to God, Amen.