

BIBLE AS PHOTO ALBUM
Sermon for Lent B—Jn 3:14-21
LPC, 3/15/15

In the years before digital photography, a family's photo albums were among its most precious possessions. I remember once, when my sister and her family were living in a house near the beach they had to evacuate because of a coming hurricane. My sister was told she could take two suitcases. She filled one with family photographs, knowing they could never be replaced if lost.

One way to think of the Bible is as a sort of precious family album. The Bible resembles a family album in many ways. First, it memorializes significant events in the life of a family, God's family. Secondly, it represents multiple generations and branches of the family. Third, not all the snapshots are all that flattering. Finally, the Bible shows the family growing over time.

One of the things that you can track growing over time in the Bible is the family's understanding of what love is. In the oldest parts of the Bible, love does not, apparently, mean the same thing that the word "love" means to us today. Here love is less an emotion than the active practice of valuing something. To love something was to consider it of great account. Conversely, to hate something was the practice of disregarding something: to consider it of no account.

Thus to love God with all your heart, soul and mind is to value God with everything that is yours. To love your neighbor as yourself is to consider your neighbor's life and well-being to have the same value as your own.

In particular, over the course of the Bible, people seem to grow in their understanding of the love that God has for God's people. At first, people seem to expect God to love pretty much the same way people tend to love: possessively, jealously, competitively, conditionally, exclusively.

In a religious climate where each ethnicity was thought to have its own God, the Hebrews believed their own God had exclusively chosen them, and covenanted with them, favoring them with promises of land and progeny. One biblical snapshot in fact shows the people massacring and displacing other peoples, because, of course, their God was better and stronger than everybody else's. At this point the people's idea of God's love was exclusive, competitive, and jealous.

But of course that's only one of many snapshots in the Old Testament. In another, things are going badly for God's people. How can this be if God loves them and they are God's favorites? They must be suffering because they have failed to honor the covenant God has made with them. Their failure to meet the conditions of their agreement with God has left God free to withhold love. In this snapshot, the people's idea of God's love is conditional.

Let's look at another snapshot: some of God's people are beginning to reason that if their God is the most powerful of all gods, that in fact their God must be the only real God. Therefore, their God must have made the earth and all those other people, even the ones who don't recognize the one true God. Why would God have made all those other people if we're the chosen ones? Can it mean that being chosen means something other than being given land and progeny? This is one of the snapshots offered by the Prophet Isaiah: part of what it means to be God's chosen people is to convey our God's light to all those other people.

In this snapshot, the people are starting to think of God's love as universal and inclusive. Frankly, as God's family we are still trying to figure out exactly what this means!

As we move toward the time of Jesus, another snapshot comes into focus. Some of God's people start to realize that God has been with them, comforting and sustaining them, even when they've been bad, and even under adverse circumstances. God's love must be bigger than human love, which tends to be conditional. Their relationship with God is evolving, becoming more like love between humans when it's at its best, instead of at its worst. They no longer obey God's law out of duty, or fear that something bad will happen if they don't.

In this snapshot, a few people are starting to think of God's love as unconditional, parental. People are returning God's love as grateful children. This is something, incidentally, that baffled the Roman occupiers of Palestine.

Let's now turn to the New Testament portion of our biblical photo album. In Jesus we get an extreme close-up of God's love. And what do we see? "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

As views of God's love go, this is a different order of magnitude. God's love is not shown in land, power and progeny. God's love cannot even be contained in covenant and law. God's love is so limitless that God actually gives up God's Son, the dearest part of Godself, to us. What greater love can there be?

In two thousand years, humans have failed to come up with a stronger image of loving self-sacrifice. It's one thing to give up your own life for someone you love, but who would give up their own child's life? In this snapshot, we understand God's love to be, for all intents and purposes, limitless.

Our biblical photo album leaves us with a picture of God's love as universal, inclusive, unconditional, parental and limitless. But this particular passage also leaves us with something that takes us back to the prophet Isaiah and that revelation that to be God's family means to be a light to the world. "God so loved *the world*." God loves individuals, God loves groups and tribes of people, but God loves the world. The Greek word is *κοσμον* (cosmon): the cosmos, the universe. Who are we to hate, in any sense, any part of that which God loves so much he gave his Son?