

Who *is* God? You know, there are many reasons why people stop believing in God. I seriously think one of the reasons is sadly because many people simply don't know *who God is*. If there's seriously anyone out there who's a victim of destructive, false rumors that are ruining their reputation, it's God. There are so many false rumors and ideas that are circulating out there in peoples' minds and in the culture about the very identity of God.

Yet in today's Liturgy of the Word and most especially in the second reading from the First Letter of St. John, God seeks to dispel all the false rumors and ideas that are circulating about Him. In the second reading, God clearly reveals to us *exactly Who He is* saying: "Whoever is without love *does not know God*, for *God is love*."

In his commentary on the First Letter of St. John, and on this powerful phrase in particular, St. Augustine beautifully wrote the following: "Even if *nothing else* were said in praise of love in all the pages of this epistle, *even if nothing else were said in all the pages of Holy Scripture*, and *the only thing* we heard from the mouth of the Holy Spirit were '*God is love*,' we would need to search no more."

Brothers and sisters, contrary to all of the false rumors and popular stereotypes, God is *not* some “mean-spirited bully” or “monstrous dictator” we have recoil from in utter terror. God isn’t some fierce competitor Who’s trying to prevent us from being happy and free. God *is* love! This isn’t some “cheesy, New Age spirituality.” Rather this is Divine Revelation and objective Reality with a capital “R”! God *is* the selfless desire for our true and authentic good!

Now you might say, “Okay Father, well that sounds nice, but how do I know with certainty that God *is* love?!” Well, in that very same letter, God Himself tells us how we can know with certainty Who He is. St. John writes, “*In this way the love of God was revealed to us: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might have life through him.*” So it is our Lord Jesus Christ Who perfectly and completely reveals to us Who God is! Our Lord Jesus is “God in the flesh”—He is Love incarnate! He is the perfect fullness of Divine Revelation.

St. John goes on to say in the second reading: “In this is love: *not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as expiation for our sins.*” Jesus says something similar in today’s Gospel

when He says, “It was not you who chose me, *but I who chose you...*”

In other words, we don't we *earn* God's love in any way. It's not like how many “good works do I have to perform in order to earn God's love or get God to love me?” As St. Teresa of Avila says, “God loves us more than we love ourselves.” God is the ultimate risk-taker when it comes to relationships. Out of His perfect love for us, He *always acts first* and proactively takes the initiative in reaching out to us and inviting us to respond to His love. Even before we respond to God's love, He calls us “beloved.”

The truth is that God loves us *unconditionally* and in *spite of our* sinfulness! Jesus basically says this in today's Gospel when He says, “As the Father loves me, so I also love you,” meaning that just as the Father loves the sinless Son with an unconditional, infinite, and perfect love within the life of the Trinity, so Christ *also loves us sinners* with an unconditional, perfect, and infinite love. So again, we don't have to do anything to *earn* God's love. *However*, we are invited to *respond to God's love* by loving Him in return with *our whole life—in our thoughts, words, and actions*.

Let me be clear brothers and sisters, God's unconditional love for us should truly comfort and uplift us. But at the same time, we need to guard against the temptation to presumption, which is to selfishly abuse God's love and take it for granted, thinking to ourselves, "Well if God loves me unconditionally then I can do whatever I want, live a sinful life, and still go to Heaven and He'll just me forgive me anyway in the end." That's like saying, "Well if my parents love me unconditionally, then I can just keep disobeying, disrespecting, hurting them, and offending them, and they'll just forgive me in the end." Would we want *others* to treat our unconditional love *for them* like that? Such an attitude towards God is not love, but rather pure selfishness and a blatant rejection of God's love revealed to us in Christ and His Church. This is why Jesus exhorts us in today's Gospel to "remain in my love" because He's implying that we can reject and abandon His love through sin.

So God's perfect, unconditional love for us is *not* a license to sin—rather it's an invitation for us to *love God in return with our whole being and to love as He loves*. Brothers and sisters, the only rational response to God's unconditional love *for us* is a reciprocal unconditional

love *for God*. And in today's Gospel, Jesus reminds us that love for God and love for our neighbor are inseparably one! St. Clement of Alexandria beautifully summarizes the teaching of Christ and His Church on this point saying, "Seeing your brother is seeing God." And if we're honest with our forgetful and sinful selves, then we need constant reminding of this basic truth of the Gospel.

In fact in today's Gospel Jesus explicitly *commands* us *twice* to *love one another*. And not just "love one another" but Jesus says, "love one another *as I love you*" meaning "love others with the *same unconditional, perfect, and faithful love that I have for you*—love as I love"! And notice the language: Jesus doesn't say, "Hey this is a nice option I'm proposing to you as my disciples" or "this is a good suggestion I'm giving you—take it or leave it." No He says, "This is my *commandment*: love one another as I love you... This I *command* you: love one another... You are my friends *if you do what I command you*." And whenever the Son of God *repeats something as a command*, we better pay attention and listen.

Brothers and sisters, it's only in discovering Who God is, do we then come to discover who we are and how we're called to live. Make no mistake, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ *is Who God is*. So in light of God's identity and what our Lord Jesus *commands* us to do as His disciples, who do we struggle to love? Is it a spouse, a parent, a sibling, a family member, a child, a friend, a co-worker, an enemy, a classmate?

As we worship and receive our Lord Jesus Christ in the Most Holy Eucharist, let's plead with our Lord, *Who is Love Itself*, to abundantly pour out upon us the grace to *respond wholeheartedly* to His infinite, unconditional love for us and in the same breath, let's then beg Him for the grace to *love as He loves*, especially those in our lives who we seriously struggle to love.