

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

As she was leaving Mass recently, a Mother asked me to pray for her adult daughter who is battling various forms of cancer. I hugged her and assured her that I would pray for her daughter. Her tears started to flow and she cried, “I just wish she would come back to church. I’m sure she believes in God, but I can’t get her to come back to church. What’s to become of her?”

I hugged her a little tighter. Then I asked this sorrowful Mother, “Do you still love her even though she has cancer?” “Of course!” she said. “Do you still love her even though she doesn’t come to church,” I asked? “Surely!” she replied. Then, I said, “So, even though she isn’t perfect and she doesn’t do everything the way you want her to, you still love her unconditionally don’t you?” “Oh, yes!” cried the Mother. I said, “And so does God. He loves her even more than you do. Even now, especially now that she is so sick, God is wrapping His arms around her in a warm embrace.” Isn’t that what Jesus told us when he said, “Which one of you would hand his son a stone when he asks for a piece of bread, or a snake when he asks for a fish? If you, then,...know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to those who ask him?” Finally, this dear grieving Mother smiled and said, “Oh, thank you, Father! I needed to hear that!”

Don’t we all? Don’t we all need to hear that God loves us unconditionally. He loves us when we’re right and when we’re wrong; He loves us when we’re doing good and when we’re not so good; He loves us as unconditionally as the most loving parent loves his or her children. That is the greatest miracle; the greatest Good News of all—God loves us completely, unconditionally, without question.

It is because God first loves us that the only response to so great a love is what Jesus and the Scribe of today’s Gospel call the first of all the commandments: “The Lord our God is Lord alone! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Most of you know of Warren Buffett, one of the world’s richest men. He is a legend when it comes to making wise decisions in the financial world and has become a billionaire many times over. Some people are willing to pay thousands of dollars for his wisdom about the stock market. However, when a reporter recently asked Buffett for the best advice he ever received, he didn’t talk about money at all. Rather he focused on how best to live...how to raise your children. Buffett said the key is unconditional love. In his words, “There is no power on earth like unconditional love. And I think if you offered that to your child, you’re 90% home. There may be days when you don’t feel like it—it’s not uncritical love; that’s a different animal—but to know you can always come back, that is huge in life. That

takes you a long, long way. And I would say that every parent out there that can extend that to their children at an early age, it's going to make for a better human being.

So, here we have Warren Buffett telling us that it's much more important to make a better human being than it is to make a great fortune in buying and selling. In other words, he is saying we need to love as God loves—unconditionally.

As Jesus tells the Scribe in today's Gospel when you understand that "you are not far from the Kingdom of God."

Unfortunately, many of us encounter difficulties in coming to unconditional love. First and foremost among those obstacles is experiencing ourselves as being loved. Did you notice, in the second part of the Great Commandment, Jesus tells us, "to love your neighbor as yourself". But, if you don't love yourself, you can't possibly come to love your neighbor, let alone God.

In the musical "Oliver", the beaten, bruised, battered, and abused little orphan sings, trying to recall his mother's love: "Where is love? Does it fall from skies above? Is it underneath the willow tree that I've been dreaming of? Where is she? Who I close my eyes to see? Will I ever know the sweet "hello" that's only meant for me? Who can say where she may hide: Must I travel far and wide? 'Til I am beside the someone who I can mean something to...Where? Where is love? Who can say where...she may hide? Must I travel far and wide? 'Til I am beside the someone who I can mean something to? Where? Where? Where is love?"

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, I offer for your consideration this morning that this is our number one problem in life—too many of us do not trust or believe or experience ourselves as unconditionally loved. Sometimes it seems to me that the world is full of beaten, bruised, battered, abused little "Olivers" always looking for that unconditional love.

Some of us look for love in all the wrong places and live with disappointment that makes life a drudgery. Others seek to escape the pain of loneliness in substance abuse. Others use more acceptable forms of escape by becoming workaholics or gamers or sports freaks. It seems to me that the escape de jour is social media—facebook, twitter, Instagram, and the like—all ways of seeking the approval that is a poor substitute for unconditional love.

Where? Oh, Where? Where is love? God created us in such a way that He knew this would be the greatest yearning of our human hearts. And he knew that only he could fulfill that yearning because that is who God is. God is Love.

But God also created us with questioning minds, as well as with yearning hearts. He knew that we would require some way of knowing that He loves each and every one of us—his

children—completely, totally, and unconditionally. So, he sent his Son in the person of Jesus Christ to show us that is how much he loves us. And Jesus did that by taking all our brokenness upon himself and became the sign of God’s everlasting love by showing us that he loves us so much that he died for us. The Cross of Calvary is the ultimate sign that God loves us unconditionally.

However, for too many of us, even that is not enough. That, I submit, is why the Cross is not the end of the story of God’s unconditional love for us. God raised Christ up. He raised Him from the dead and gathered Him back into the fullness of His Kingdom to be the blessed assurance that God’s unconditional love for us is unremitting. He never gives up on us. He never quits loving us.

That’s what the Sacred Writer of our second reading from the Letter to the Hebrews is telling us today, “Jesus, because he remains forever, has a priesthood that does not pass away. Therefore, he is always able to save those who approach God through Him, since he lives forever to make intercession for them.”

Don’t you see? Don’t you understand? That’s what is going on here, at this Mass, today. God is showing us yet again; He’s proving to us, yet again, His unconditional love for us. We began our celebration lifting high the Cross of Christ and in a few moments, called by God and appointed for the task in all my weakness, I will lift high the Bread of Life and the Cup of Salvation that will be the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ once again making intercession for us in all our bruised, battered, and abused, brokenness that we might trust, believe, and experience the warmth of God’s unconditional love.

Every time then when we feel lost and all alone, all we need do is gaze on the body of Christ on a crucifix and open our eyes of faith to see his outstretched arms reach out from the Cross to embrace us in the unconditional love of God. Every time we see the Bread of Life and the Cup of Salvation lifted at Mass, all we need do is open the ears of our hearts to hear Jesus interceding to God for us, begging for mercy, healing, and compassionate already-forgiving love. Every time we receive Him in the Eucharist, all we need do is open the horizons of our minds and hearts to experience the Spirit of God’s unconditional love poured forth into our very being.

In answer to the question, “Where is love?” it is here. Love is on the Cross that we venerate. Love is in the Eucharistic Presence that we worship. Love is in the sweet communion of our bodies and souls with the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Christ Jesus, the pledge of God’s unconditional love. Then, knowing that we are truly loved; believing in that love; and feeling that love, God’s command to us is to go forth and love your neighbor as you know and understand yourself to be loved. Like the Scribe in the Gospel, then, “You are not far from the Kingdom of God”.