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<sup>6</sup> This is the one who came by water and blood —Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. <sup>7</sup> For there are three that testify: <sup>8</sup> the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement. 1 John 5:6-8

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“Blood is thicker than water.” This is an old proverb in English meaning that family bonds will usually be stronger than bonds of friendship or love (insofar as family is always ‘there’). The saying “Blood is thicker than water” points to some sense of a permanency of ‘bonds’ (and perhaps understanding of ‘self-identity’) is usually associated with ‘family’.

However, in a ‘sacramental church’ (such as a Lutheran Church) one could also say “Water is thicker than blood.” We can say this because the bonds God has given us in baptism to the life and death and resurrection of Jesus is far more ‘permanent’ and ‘eternal’ than any sense of family (see also Romans 6:3-5: “Don’t you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into His death? We were therefore buried with Him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. For if we have been united with Him in a death like His, we will certainly also be united with Him in a resurrection like His). “Water is thicker than blood.”

This then leads to a set of questions relating to how we may see ourselves as being ‘connected’ to people around us. All of us live with a sense and set of relationships with people around us. Today (9<sup>th</sup> May 2021) many people will be remembering ‘Mother’s Day’. There are various senses of ‘connections’ here, and for most people this will be positive (but we also note there will be some who are upset by this day because a desire to be a mother has not been fulfilled, and others have a sense of grief as they remember those who have died, and others may even be angry as they have had a very negative experience – perhaps even of abandonment, true neglect or abuse).

We are ‘connected’ by a sense of family. But we also are ‘connected’ through work connections, social groups, church groups, volunteer work, and various shared experiences (such as grief and loss, joyful moments, common interests, or shared experiences such as natural disasters, world events, or the like).

Think of all the people you are ‘connected’ to in your current life experience.

As we think of a ‘sense of connection’, all of us in one way or another wish to know that we are ‘loved for’, ‘cared for’, and genuinely appreciated. There is an obvious connection here with our other readings for today (Acts 10:44-48 – the ‘connection’ between long-term ‘church members’ and ‘newcomers to the faith’; 1 John 5:1-8: The call of Christians to love one another as children of the

Father; John 15:9-17: Jesus' call for Christians to love one another as He has loved us.

This then leads to the question: "What is love?" Various answers include: to care about someone; to 'be there' for someone; to trust someone; to be able to confide in someone; and so on. What is love? (What responses would you add?)

One way of reflecting on this theme of 'love' is through the well-known Bible passage, 1 Corinthians 13:4-7. Here the Bible says "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres." And, as you know, one of the things a person can do is substitute their name at the place of 'love', and then to honestly self-reflect on the way a person lives their life. (do this...)

After reflecting on 'love' in this way, it is also important to look at Bible passage such as 1 John 4:10 where John says this: "This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins."

As we reflect on the theme of 'love' that we all seek for true and deep 'connections', it is truly helpful to remember that "God is love" and "Love comes from God". This is important.

As we reflect on the theme of love, we can note that 'love' is both a 'verb' and a 'noun'. It is something we 'do', but it is also something we 'experience' (that is, something that is given to us). As we think of 'love' as a 'verb' we may reflect on various ways we may show love to others. Many 'ways' are usually offered, but there are two or three key ideas to look for. First, we need to tell people we love them, and we need to do so often. A story is sometimes told of a man married for many years whose wife wanted to hear him say, "I love you." (I've shared this before). It wasn't in this man's nature to speak these words. One day his wife asked, "Why don't you say 'I love you'?" The man responded, "You remember at our wedding when I said I loved you...? Well, I'll let you know if things change." (by the way, this is not the way most women want to live!).

But this 'love' needs to be expressed. And, 'love' needs to be enacted. Words need to be matched by actions... As we know, the Apostle John (known as 'the disciple Jesus loved') had two great concerns among the many themes that ran throughout his writings. The first is the revelation that Jesus Christ is the 'revealer of God'. The other great concern is the call of Jesus that those who believe in Him 'love one another'. And here it is important to reflect again on the Gospel for this day, John 15:9-17, where Jesus calls on us as Christians to "love one another as He has loved us".

Very often people will take this Bible passage as if to say, "Well God has loved you so much, so you must show love to others." And this is true.

But this can be made into a heavy 'law' (and often then be 'weaponised' as if to expect some sort of behaviour from another person). But true 'love' cannot be commanded. When Jesus is speaking of 'new commandment' to 'love one another', He is first and foremost calling us to remember God's love for us as revealed on the cross. As John says, "This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." John also says (1 John 5:6): "This is the one who came by water and blood —Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood."

There is some debate among Bible scholars by what is meant in the phrase "This is the one who came by water and blood." Some see this as a reference to Jesus coming to humankind in His baptism and death.

It is sometimes thought that one of the challenges John faced when writing his letters to Christians was an erroneous belief known as 'docetism'. Docetism is derived from the Greek *dokeo*, "to seem." It is the erroneous belief that Christ only *seemed* to be human, that He did not really have a 'real' human body.

Docetism is not necessarily a 'lack of faith'; rather, it may also be seen as an enthusiasm that goes too far in hailing Jesus' divinity to a point where the real human Jesus is denied. Its modern forms appear when people portray Jesus as a superman: never troubled, never sad, always on top of things, and then present Christianity as a recipe for triumphant living. But the 'happy Jesus' does not measure up with the Christ of the cross. Jesus is 'truly human', as He also is God at work in this world.

But there is also another 'way' we may understand the phrase, "This is the one who came by water and", and it is connected with the verses that follow (1 John 5:7-8): "And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. For there are three that testify: the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement."

How does the Holy Spirit 'work' here? One Bible commentator puts it like this: *On the cross flowed the water and the blood (John 19:34). Two rites, both monumental institutions, hence both of them witnesses, testify of Him. We are baptised into His death (Rom. 6:1-3); the Lord's Supper points to His shed blood. We may understand "this is the one who came by water and the blood" as also about how Jesus comes to us, and 'touches us' with His love.*

How can we be 'sure' of 'God's love'? Through the Bible the Holy Spirit 'speaks' to us, and through the sacraments the Holy Spirit touches us with God's love. Note: it is not the Word and sacraments themselves that effect faith in us. Rather, they are "instruments" by which the Holy Spirit is given to us, and it is the Holy Spirit who "effects faith". This, then, gives us a great reassurance.

How do you 'know' what 'real love' is? Many in our world are 'looking for love'. In what way are you 'looking for love'? When we look to the cross of Jesus, we see a true reference point for love that has sustained hundreds of millions of people throughout the ages. And perhaps we need to stop and meditate on this more.

Whilst we live on this earth there are some 'family connections', or other 'community connections' that may get 'broken. And whilst some may say that an emotional level you should be able to 'get over it', we know in the depths of our hearts it's not so 'easy'. Indeed, there are some 'broken connections' that will be very difficult to 'fix' this side of eternity. But there is some Good News here for us. You see, even in the times we may not *feel* like we are loved, God loves us nevertheless. And this is a 'love' that transcends our emotions, our words, our deeds, and even our sin. Jesus is the one who came by water and the blood to give forgiveness; to heal broken hearts and lives.

Our passage today begins with an argument based on parents and children. If you love the Father you will love the Father's children. The life of faith is a life within a 'family', that is, the 'family of God'. God is the Father of this family. Jesus is our 'brother'. And this 'family of faith' lives in 'one Spirit'. And what really matters is knowing in our minds and in our hearts is that God's love truly sets us free. That doesn't mean you will not experience 'brokenness' in this life. But no matter what, you have a sure place in God's family. Your baptism assures it; Communion strengthens this. Here the Spirit says, "You are loved; live in that love now and always". Amen.