

Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost (A/RCL)

Romans 12.9-21

August 31, 2008

Holy Trinity, Manasquan

Some Scripture is puzzling, and doesn't make much sense until someone unpacks it for us, gives us deep background, explains what was going on historically when the passage was written, tells us about the author and the audience, takes us by the hand and walks us through, verse by verse. That can be especially true of St. Paul's writings. He was a very bright man and loved long sentences, and didn't have any children he'd ever needed to explain things to, so some of what he wrote is pretty dense.... That's **not** true, though, of the passage from St. Paul's letter to the Romans which is our epistle this weekend. It is about practical love and faith in action.

St. Paul also wrote 1 Corinthians 13, which begins, "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." It is nicknamed "The Ode to Love," and is a favorite choice of brides and grooms for wedding ceremonies. Romans 12 is not as well-known, but also qualifies as an ode to love and friendship, not just or even primarily between individuals, but also between the believing community and the world.

The language of Scripture is beautiful, but scholars have had to translate it from the original tongue (in this case, New Testament Greek), into English. Scholars' work is precise, so the result is more apt to be formal than informal, "correct" instead of colloquial. In the hope of helping this lovely passage make inroads into your heart, (and just in case you were thinking about your shopping list instead of the words of the lesson as the lector read it ☺) let me share Eugene Peterson's version of Romans 12.9-21 in *The Message*:

Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle.

Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant. Don't quit in hard times; pray all the harder. Help needy Christians; be inventive in hospitality.

Bless your enemies; no cursing under your breath. Laugh with your happy friends when they're happy; share tears when they're down. Get along with each other; don't be stuck up. Make friends with nobodies; don't be the great somebody.

Don't hit back; discover beauty in everyone. If you've got it in you, get along with everybody. Don't insist on getting even; that's not for you to do. "I'll do the judging," says God. "I'll take care of it."

Our Scriptures tell us that if you see your enemy hungry, go buy that person lunch, or if he's thirsty, get him a drink. Your generosity will surprise him with goodness. Don't let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good.

One of the wonderful things about this reflection on love and friendship is that it's geared toward family, friends **and** enemies, insiders and outsiders alike. It's not another list of commandments to be memorized. It's a watercolor of what our actions look like when they're "rooted and grounded in love" (Ephesians 3.17). This isn't how we act in order to earn God's love in the future. It's how we act in response to God's love already received! It's a "for instance" of how we treat others when we remember how God has treated us: with **genuine love**, with **accepting love**, with **costly and redeeming love**.

St. Paul says, "Let love be genuine." Accept no imitations! Offer others the real McCoy, not a counterfeit. Genuine love lasts over the long haul. It doesn't evaporate like the drops of a sun shower hitting hot pavement. It's the kind of love expressed by Carol Lee Tiemann and the other volunteers who continue to return to the areas devastated by Hurricane Katrina three years ago, to rebuild homes and encourage hearts and serve as harbingers of hope.

Love that is genuine is "sincere," what-you-see-is-what-you-get love. *Sincere* literally means "without wax". In the days of the Roman Empire art collectors were concerned that the statues they purchased be "sincere", that is, without wax used to camouflage nicks or dents in the surface of the marble. Love that is genuine isn't like a storefront used on a movie set, nothing more than a picture painted on a board, a façade that imitates the real thing but is actually an

illusion, a trompe l'oeil, a trick-of-the-eye, having no depth. Genuine love tells no lies and doesn't appear to be what it isn't.

The genuine love that faithfully mirrors God's love is **accepting and welcoming**. It builds bridges instead of erecting walls. It doesn't proclaim itself superior to all other loves. It recognizes that love grows in many corners of this world and in many forms. It doesn't believe that Christians or Jews or any other religious or social group is the only one that gets it right.

An interesting thing about St. Paul's description of love is that it's generic. The virtuous behavior he exhorts us to is common. He describes actions that all moral people would recognize as good and commendable, whether those moral people are Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, agnostics or atheists. The genuinely loving Christian recognizes that people who don't share our particular faith can be equally as moral and loving as we are. We are called not only to do good ourselves, but to see and applaud and reinforce the good we see around us, whoever initiates it. Our goal is not to be as different as possible, to withdraw from the world, to highlight the differences between the world and us, to draw dividing lines among God's children of different faiths and of no faith. Our vocation is to be united within our believing community and to live in peace with the world Christ died to save.

If this genuine, accepting love is to mirror God's love fully, it will also be **costly** love. We talked last week about refusing to conform to the world like a liquid that takes the shape of its container, and about longing to be transformed by God's grace. There are points in our relationship with the world when we will need to refuse to go along to get along. Peace between us and the world, between us and the civic powers that be, will not be possible, because love is being violated, God's children are being destroyed, God's creation is being trampled. Love that is genuine and costly has its limits of acceptance, but those limits are far removed from where we usually stand. We're more apt to violate love by rejecting a certain sector of God's children than

by accepting them. Christians have sinned far more often by making the circle too small than by making it too big.

Costly love accepts the painful consequences of being a standard bearer for genuine love, for acceptance of those whom others reject, for peace in a world that seems to gravitate toward violence. Mahatma Gandhi, one of the world's most famous lovers of peace and justice, once said of his goal to end apartheid, "I would gladly die for this cause, but I will not kill for any cause." That is costly love, articulated by a Hindu who admired Jesus but did not worship Him, who once told someone, "I might have become a Christian if I had ever met one."

May we love well this week. May we practice common virtues and affirm all who act lovingly, regardless of their religion. May we treat others as God has treated us, with genuine, accepting, costly love. In that way we will glorify the Christ, whose name we bear. In that way we will honor and live up to the name Christian. Amen

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