

Proper 17, September 4, 2017
Preached at Shrine Mont
The Rev. Deacon David Curtis

Romans 12:9-21

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Matthew 16:21-28

Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?"

"For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Welcome to the Shrine of the Transfiguration, and to this joint worship service. It is my great pleasure to welcome members from Emmanuel Brook Hill, Emmanuel Green Wood, and St. John's Churches to this holy and sacred place for this combined worship.

If you have been paying attention to the weekly lectionary, and I'm sure that you have, you will have noticed that we are reading a lot from Paul's Letter to the Romans. This letter is one of my favorite books of the bible. Some of us here, including myself, may have troubled

relationships with Paul. Some of us have had Paul quoted to us, and others have had him quoted at us. And not in a loving way. But that doesn't mean we should ignore this letter.

Paul's letter to the Romans is very different from his other letters. For one, he is not writing to a church that he founded to settle an argument or to provide pastoral care. No. His letter to the Romans is really an introductory letter to the Christian community. Paul is planning to visit Spain and wants to stop over in Rome, to visit the community there.

Paul's letter to the Romans is his clearest writing in what I would consider a systematic theology. Romans is a dense, meaty letter, in which Paul tackles several subjects head on. What is the role of the Law? What is the place of righteousness? How does grace work? If we have grace, should we keep on sinning so that grace may abound? (The answer to that last one is no, by the way.) I recommend spending time with Romans to see how Paul answers those questions.

For Paul, community is a major concern. His words about loving others and being present are not individual virtues or calls to individual holiness. It is how the community should act. The community must foster love among its members.

Paul comes from a Jewish understanding of relationship. For the Jewish people, sin and redemption are both corporate. This may come as a surprise to some Christians here in the land of the free and the home of the brave. We have God given individual rights. Some believe that our redemption by Jesus is based on a very individualistic profession of faith. We need to accept Jesus in our hearts as our Lord and Savior. That is one view.

Paul believed that it was the Christian Community, not individuals, who would bear witness to Jesus. And, they would do it by their lives of holiness and peace. They would become so counter cultural that people would notice. It would be in the living of their lives that they would proclaim Jesus. "And they will know we are Christians by our love, by our love".

Sound familiar? It should. It's the gospel in its purest form. Turn the other cheek. Love those that persecute you. If some takes your coat, give them your shirt. If you are forced to go one mile, go two. Forgive freely. Love fully.

Jesus invites us into this counter cultural life by stating flatly and directly that if we wish to be his disciples, we must take up our crosses. Notice that Jesus didn't say that he would give us crosses to bear in this life. No. The choice to take up the cross must be ours. We must die to self and pick up the cross to follow Jesus. And, by dying to self, we too may find resurrection and new life.

For the disciples, "take up our cross" was not simply a call to discipleship. It was the cost of discipleship. The disciples would have witnessed men carrying their crosses to their death under Roman oppression. They knew what Jesus was saying. At this point, the cross was not a means of salvation and resurrection. The cross was a painful, dishonorable death. Jesus was telling them, and is telling us, that his call is not for the faint of heart. Jesus demands our all.

So, let me ask a question: in the wake of Hurricane Harvey, in the aftermath of white supremacists marching in Charlottesville, in a time when our nation seems more divided than ever, what is Jesus's call to us today? What does taking up the cross today look like? How does this radical love that Jesus and Paul preached change the world?

It starts with us. It starts with us, dying to our vanity and our ego. In this divided time, it can begin with listening, really listening, to others' stories, to their pain, to their lives. Too many times we listen only to figure out how we will respond. Not many of us will take the time to simply listen and bear witness to another's life or pain. But it is that listening that may very well allow us to move beyond the surety of our beliefs and the firmness of our positions. And when we do that, we can begin to die to self and live more fully for Jesus.

And we can love. We can love willingly and willfully. We can love unconditionally and with abandon. We can love those that look like us and those that don't. We can love those who love us, those who hate us, and those who believe are completely unworthy of our love.

I strongly believe in the already and not yet Kingdom of God. I believe that the Kingdom of God is breaking into this world, right here, right now, today. And I believe that the Kingdom of God will come in its fullness at the end of time. And I believe that when we follow Jesus, when we love, when we pick up our crosses, we help this great Kingdom of God to be present and to be known.

So, where does that leave us today? Geographically, it leaves us on this holy mountain. More importantly, it leaves us equipped for the living of these dark, divided days. We are equipped with a sacred and holy love that will change this world. We will carry this love with us as we return to our homes, our communities, our lives. It is this love that will continue to bring about the Kingdom of God. It is the same love that Paul preached. And it is the same love that we find hanging on a cross, overlooking Jerusalem, some 2,000 years ago.

At the end of the Eucharist, you will hear the familiar words of the dismissal. These words are not simply a prelude to lunch. The dismissal gives us our marching orders. Go. Love. Serve. After all, that is Jesus did. Amen.