

Historic St. John's Episcopal Church, Richmond, VA
The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
February 3, 2019
"And the greatest of these is love."
The Rev. William T. Pickering

I. The Epistle for this morning is just about the most popular lesson for a wedding – and that's not a bad thing at all.

A. This passage is one of the most beautiful love poems written. The Song of Solomon has some lovely passages – even a little bawdy -- but this passage from St. Paul is certainly among the most beautiful in the Scriptures.

1. Knowing what we do about St. Paul, however, I am sure he would be a bit surprised that this passage is used as it is for weddings.

2. The love that Paul is talking about is the love that binds all people together. It is the love of God, and it is the love that Jesus was talking about when he commanded us to love one another. That does not make it inappropriate for a wedding by any means, but it is more than about the relationship between married people.

3. This is the love that we so desperately lack and that makes so many who are outside our Christian tradition – and outside of the Church – view us as such terrible hypocrites, because we do it so badly.

4. This is the love that many within the Christian community say makes us look wishy-washy and spineless.

5. It carries many of us back to the '60s when we thought that love was indeed all that was needed – as the Beatles so eloquently sang for us – "All you need is love, love, love is all you need."

II. Let's look at what St. Paul says: "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends."

A. It is a great prescription for interpersonal relationships and life.

1. "Patient and kind" a difficult order in any time, but especially now when we are so into instant gratification and a survival of the fittest mentality that leaves the less aggressive behind and kindness for fools.

2. "Love is not envious boastful or rude." It sounds a great deal like my mother teaching me manners, but it also points to a civility and graciousness of spirit that has faded into the past – especially in this time.

3. "It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth." These difficult relational concepts I would love to have printed above the doors to the entrance of our legislative houses. This passage recognizes that if love is to be at all productive, it cannot have us carping at one another all the time. If we are always celebrating what the other has done wrong, we will never get to the truth. Love searches out and glories in the truth. What a concept in 2019!!!

4. "It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." Love is far from simple and wishy-washy. These words were to encourage and uplift those trying to live a life in accordance with the love of God, when there were those who would do great harm to them – bear it – endure it – hope. Love requires that kind of commitment. Especially important in a marriage, but even more so if human kind is going to move beyond our own, individual concerns with any willingness to sacrifice for the greater good and for our God and the building of the Kingdom.

B. Love is at the core of our theological self-understanding, and when we forget that, we risk losing our identity as the Body of Christ and become some other kind of institution.

1. We can be charitable in our attitude toward those less fortunate, but not have love. We can be a distributor of resources and aid, and a very efficient one, but have no love. We can be a congenial, welcoming and even comforting social institution but have no love. Without love, we will not be the Church.

2. The Church is not just an institution. The Church is not an institution at all. The institution exists to support and give structure to the Church, but it is not the Church.

III. This past week saw the end to the longest government shut down in our history, with nothing being resolved by it. This is only for three weeks, and all indications are that it will shut down again when that

time is up.

A. If there ever was a time when we needed to be the Church and press the awesome power of love, it would be now. The contention in our politics has fractured us into intransigent camps, and conversation, civil debate, discussion, and reconciliation, all seem impossible concepts, but we really are better than this, and we are called to be better than this.

1. As many of you know we have a home on Oak Island, North Carolina.

2. The church in Southport (the nearest town) was devastated by Hurricane Florence, so badly that the Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, came to the parish to preach and celebrate with them in the Oak Island Moose Lodge to encourage them and show the love of the Episcopal Church. They moved back to the sanctuary just two weeks ago, and it is still a mess, but useable.

3. The wonder is how this event has brought the congregation together, and brought congregations in the community together in offering assistance – love, I believe, does come forth in adversity.

4. With over \$250,000 in deductibles on their Insurance, the Parish is pressing to raise the money so the work can proceed. At the same time, they have raised funds to support the Coast Guard men and women on Oak Island who have had to work without pay for over a month – getting gas cards, and food cards for them to help them through their crisis.

5. It is time to press for those who have the power to make a difference to return to some level of civility, to recognize the destructiveness of the present behavior, and to recognize the forgotten truth that Jesus proclaimed, St. Paul enshrined, and that makes us what we were created to be: “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.”

Amen.