

PENTECOST XVa

Let Love Be Genuine –Romans 12:9; Matthew 16:21-28

St Paul's letter to the Romans is not always as clear or as brilliant as this morsel we have been given to feed on this day:

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; Love one another with mutual affection... extend hospitality to strangers.

If only our world, our city, our community and our congregations lived that way, what a wonderful world it would be! Praise be to God!

Almost every religion tries to honor these moral commands. We Christians are called by St. Paul to live out these words, not as moral commands to us, but as the word "Let" suggests, --"**Let** love be genuine" -- by inviting us to live out these words in companionship, the companionship of God's Holy Spirit in us.

For Christians, "Let love be genuine..." is not a moral command to obey. It is an invitation to let a Spirit, seeded in us at baptism, to grow and inspire us to truly love and care. Paul is saying, "because God loves us through Jesus' self-giving and affirming love, let's truly love one another and let that love genuinely extend hospitality to strangers. Let love flow."

Such genuine love and hospitality have flowed to me from your call committee, council members and others of you who I have had the privilege of meeting. I am so thankful and honored to be here standing where very gifted, courageous and spiritual pastors and lay people have spoken a truly Living Word of God.

Such genuine love gives us a glimpse of how the disciples must have felt as they followed Jesus through Galilee. They found themselves drawn to his love, to his full and inclusive welcome without barrier or prejudice, to the fact that he cared for them; cared for their struggles within themselves

and with the other claims on their lives.

But God is full of surprises. Jesus' disciples, so buoyed, so affirmed, so excited at the vision Jesus had for his kingdom of God, could not believe their ears when he told of his impending departure with its horrific suffering and death. All they could hear was separation, loss –abandonment, the end.

You too can understand their reaction as you heard Pastor Phyllis' parting words to you last Sunday. But there was a difference. Mary, Peter and the other disciples saw only an end to all they hoped for, saw only his death –saw only the negatives.

But, because you are in this community of the resurrected Christ, not only did you feel the pain of departure, the parting of a true friend and pastor. You also heard positives that Mary and Peter could not even imagine when they heard Jesus' predictions. You heard, in the confidence of faith, that God has given St. Francis a future to claim. For God has plans for St. Francis as a beacon of grace-filled light to this community, to the churches and to the whole world.

Your vision for ministry to shine that light of Christ, a light that frees all people to claim their wholeness, to find and affirm their integrity, this light has drawn me to offer my gifts in partnership with you. By God's grace, working together, we shall set our sights on growing St. Francis and spreading the light of Christ to our community and city. Let our love be genuine.

On the flight from Chicago I was settling in for the long trip and starting on a book. The woman next to me kept looking toward me and finally plucked up the will to talk. We exchanged the usual pleasantries. Nancy was from the East Bay and I said I was from Chicago, but given my

accent, I could tell by her expression that my answer sounded too wrong to be true.

So she politely questioned that I sounded like “back East”. So I gave her a reprise of my roots. I had a book I wanted to read, but she wanted to talk. So, at last, I listened. Let love be genuine.

Nancy told me that she had just left her only son off at Notre Dame. He was a freshman. Sensing pain, I commented, “This must have been a high as well as a low point for you.” She visibly trembled and said, “Yes, it was. To see our boy eager for college! Yet our kids grow up and don’t seem to need us anymore. They are so eager to get away. We give them roots and they get their own wings and can’t wait to fly away.”

I could sense the pain of parting this dear mother felt for her only son. And here she was telling me –a complete stranger who had wanted to get to an abstract book on theology. Here was a life graciously given to me, wondrous and painful. I felt a little ashamed for being so self-concerned, so inhospitable. But now I genuinely listened to her story and, having two daughters in college, I knew her emotional journey of parting from ones I loved.

And then I said, “If we let them go they will return one day. If we try to hold onto them, we could lose them forever. He will come home.” These words seemed to ring well with Nancy and she smiled, relaxed and thanked me for listening.

One of the most important features of having love that is genuine is that we be good listeners. In our culture there are not many people who take the time to listen to us. I am called to listen to you –to your needs, your hurts, your dreams. This church is called to be a place where you are listened to. This church is also called to be a place where life’s wondrous

mysteries are addressed in community –and that requires our listening too. Indeed the community that is church is itself one of life's mysteries –and one of life's opportunities.

Nancy was sharing part of her journey with me. We both were nourished by the sharing. You and Pastor Phyllis shared your journey together, nourished each other and felt the sweet sadness of parting. Jesus was sharing his journey to his disciples. They weren't listening, so they did not know how to nourish him. How lonely that must have been for him!

But God listened and so Jesus overcame death. The good news for us is that because we have heard Jesus' story, his journey, we do not have to reinvent that wheel. Christ has made the ultimate journey for you –you are only asked to trust in that promise. You are invited to share your journey in this community of Christian faith for your healing, for being nourished and for extending your genuine love to others who suffer on their journeys of self-understanding, liberation and getting love to flow.

In the Gospel reading, Christ invites us to follow. And sometimes following Christ will lead to suffering, to taking up a cross –but a suffering not from super guilt, but the suffering that comes from the struggle of claiming our wholeness and the wholeness of all God's creation. God's work is yet unfinished. And this wondrous church called together by God as St. Francis has wondrous opportunities for life. Are we listening?

Obviously we cannot do it alone, but to quote that Jewish proverb, (and why not, Goldstein?): When there is darkness in the world, go and light a candle. You have lighted such a candle of justice and hope. You are already a beacon of light to the world piercing the darkness of the churches and of the creation yet incomplete. So in that wondrous light, in

that wondrous and mysterious life together:

*Let your love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good;
Love one another with mutual affection... extend hospitality to
strangers.*

Amen