

SPG#181, Pentecost 18A, Proper 19

September 14, 2008

Genesis 50:15-21

Romans 14:1-12

Matthew 18:21-35

What is love?

Most likely we would first answer that question with some of our favorite and idyllic descriptions of love such as the romance between lovers, or the love of a parent for a child, or the love of a special friend. And the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 13 is quite specific in his descriptions of love. He 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.**

In contrast to the beautiful and idyllic pictures of love we see in those words, there are the words in today's epistle from Romans that are more about the nuts and bolts of loving than they are about the perfume of love that is accomplished. Paul begins in Romans today by saying, **Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions.** It almost sounds like he is saying that we must be tolerant of those who are obviously beneath us. And if we read only this one statement, there would be a danger of coming away with that interpretation. But as usual we will see that Paul is after something larger and deeper than what seems to appear in any one statement.

His words reflect the difference of opinion between Gentiles and Jews within the church of that day. And his words reflect the disagreements they were having on Jewish dietary laws. He says, **Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand. Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. And those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God.**

And then in words that appear in the burial rite in the Prayer Book he says,

We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die we are the Lord's. And then he ends by repeating what has said about not passing judgment on each other. In between the lines and in the midst of all the instructions about not judging, the reader will discern Paul's call to a great equality, a great respect, a great consideration for each other.

I perceive that these words are about loving. And yet they do not refer to the warm feelings that we normally associate with love and affection. Many of us recall as parents what it was like to change a diaper.

In fact many of us are not able to quickly forget our most recent experience with that activity. I think most of us would agree it is a loving act. But perhaps love is not uppermost on one's mind while the deed is in progress.

And I think Paul has this kind of loving act in mind when he says that we should not judge each other because of different approaches, different opinions, or different positions. And he does not try to dress up his statements about being considerate and respectful, even in our differences. He just says that we need to do it.

Perhaps in an election year we as Americans are more prone to think win or lose, one up or one down, right or wrong, Republican or Democrat. The themes were different in the first century. But that is exactly the kind of win-lose community Paul is addressing in today's epistle.

In Richard Rubenstein's book, When Jesus Became God, he discusses the Arian controversy in the fourth century. The man known as Arius believed that Jesus was holy, but he did not think Jesus was equal to God. In contrast the man known as Athanasius believed that Jesus is God. People lost their lives over this controversy. If a certain emperor came to power in the Roman Empire of those times it made sense to be on the side of what that emperor believed. And thus there were emperors who were anti-Arian and emperors who were Arian. And so there was a tremendous emphasis on being "right." But "right" seemed to be subjective.

That phenomenon of needing to be right is part and parcel of our lives in this culture.

And Paul says today in Romans, **let everyone be convinced in their own minds.** In other words, have opinions. Believe what you think to be correct and edifying.

But I think I could hear Paul add, but remember you are part of a community of people where some will share your opinions, and some will not. And then he would talk about being considerate and respectful and yes even loving in the face of differences.

For the past ten years or so I have made some new friends in the church. And they are some of the best friends I have ever had. And yet many of them do not think exactly as I do.

But the friendship is made even more special because we know that our love transcends differences, and that we have decided to be friends even though the differences are there. And so in this election year, when you go the polls of your life and vote. I ask that you vote yes to acceptance, respect, and love, even when it is not idyllic.

One of the most important things I have learned as a counselor has to do with what I call making a place. Not everyone who comes in for counseling is ready to consider a new way of living and looking at themselves. But in their work in counseling most people are willing to make a place in their lives for something better, even if they cannot see that something clearly. And so I ask us to make a place for something that may not be readily visible. And I ask us to make a place for love that knows no bounds. Vote yes for respect, yes for equality. Yes for love. Amen.