

13th Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 17 - Year A - August 30, 2020 [Exodus 3:1-15; Psalm 105:1-6,23-26,45c; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28]

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Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength, our courage and our freedom. Amen

INTRODUCTION: Several weeks ago, near the beginning of the peaceful protests about the murder of George Floyd, I overheard a troubling conversation in downtown Langley. A mother and her 6- or 7-year old daughter crossed the street where “BLM” [Black Lives Matter] had been scrawled in chalk on the pavement. When she saw this, the little girl looked up at her mother and said, “I thought **all** lives matter?” “Yes, they do,” her mother answered. “**They just don’t get it.**” I wish I had protested this mother’s *misunderstanding*, which she passed on to her daughter. “Black Lives Matter” does **not** mean “**Only** Black Lives Matter,” as this woman assumed and as the person who took down the Black Lives Matter sign at St. A apparently assumed. It means “Black Lives Matter **Also!**” If Black Lives Matter **Also**, then **all lives** really do matter.

The peaceful protest for racial equality evoked in the slogan “Black Lives Matter” is just one of the three crises that have engulfed our country in the past few months: we are also dealing with the tragic, ongoing consequences of Covid-19 and many of our fellow Americans are in an economic crisis. As consequences of these three crises, I daresay we all have experienced confusion, fear, sorrow, frustration, anger—perhaps even guilt and despair. I am wondering today how our experiences of these three crises in our country are affecting us here at St. Augustine's? Have our experiences changed our *self*-understanding, our understanding of our *country*, and, especially, our understanding of our *community at St. A*? When we return to in-person worship in this beloved place, will we be different? Will we relate to each other in the same ways we did *before* these crises, or will these crises have changed our understanding of what is really important and what is truly *Christian* behavior?

I don’t know how you are dealing with these crises, but I find myself turning to Scripture to remind myself what true Christian behavior looks like in every situation in life. In our reading from Romans 12 for this Sunday, Paul spells out the “*Marks of a True Christian*,” as the Harper Collins Study Bible aptly headlines this paragraph. This is where I want to focus our attention and you may wish to look at your online worship bulletin or grab your Bible and turn to Romans 12:9-21, so that you can follow along.

Each one of Paul’s admonitions to Roman Christians illustrates the words of Jesus in our Gospel lesson, “If you want to be my followers, you must deny yourself and take up your cross and follow me.” To “deny oneself” in the interest of others is to *act in love*. This is the central truth of Jesus’ example, as well as the overarching theme in Paul’s description of the “Marks of a True Christian.” I wish we had time to look at each of these true marks; but I will focus on just three in our time together: **hope, humility and harmony**.

Now, **before** I take up these three marks of a true Christian, I need to make **two introductory points** that are necessary to understand Paul's meaning in this text. 1) The first has to do with the **structure** of Romans. (Not to worry! I am not going to lecture on Paul's use of the Hellenistic letter form! But, once a teacher, always a teacher!) Each one of Paul's letters generally falls into two parts: the **first part** of each letter is **Indicative**, the **second part** is **Imperative**. Indicative means Paul's statements about **what God has done** for us in the death and resurrection of Jesus. These are Christological facts; they state what is a **given**, what is true about God's action in Jesus. An example would be something we recite in our creed: "For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate." Whether we ever respond to Jesus' sacrifice for us, or not, it stands as Christ's loving action on our behalf. The second part of Paul's letters is **Imperative**, i.e., Paul's **commands** for Christian behavior *in response* to what God has done for us in Christ. In the Imperative part of Paul's letters are his ethical demands, such as we find in our Romans lesson today: "Let love be genuine"; "Rejoice in hope"; "Associate with the lowly." So two parts in Paul's letters: Indicative and Imperative: *what God has done* for us in Jesus Christ and *what we are to do in response* to what God has done.

Now, in Romans, the **switch** from Indicative to Imperative happens at chapter 12, verses 1 & 2, which were in the Epistle reading for last Sunday: "I appeal to you therefore--"therefore", i.e., on the basis of the indicative statements I have just made about God's action in Jesus—to present your bodies as a living sacrifice.... Do not be *conformed* to this world, but be *transformed* by the renewing of your minds...." It is crucial to see that God only asks us to do something that is truly Christian **after** it is clear what God has *done for us*. This means that the real **source of our power** to live as true Christians lies in **what God has done for us** in Jesus Christ.

The second introductory point has to do with the **new age** that has dawned in the Christ-event. When Paul says, "Be not conformed to **this world**," the literal meaning in Greek is "be not conformed to **this age**—this *present age*." Paul, like Jesus, believed in **two ages**: the **present age** under the dominion of evil and the **age to come**, when God's rule over all things has finally been fully realized. If I had a blackboard here, I would draw a straight horizontal line and divide in half with a vertical line. I would label the period to the left of the dividing line "this present age" and the period to the right of the dividing line "the age to come." The dividing line marks the Christ-event—the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. What we need to understand is that *everything has changed* because of the triumph of God in Christ! The Christian is not to be conformed to this present, evil age, but to be transformed and conformed to the new age which has dawned in Jesus. Paul's admonitions in our Epistle today describe the true marks of a Christian *living the life of the new age*. Even if the new age that has dawned in Jesus is *not fully here yet*, Christians are called to live "**as if**" the new age is fully here. You find this "as if" ethic all through Paul's letters. So, you see, you and I are actually living with a foot in both ages: the present age and the age to come.

In his commentary on Romans, Anders Nygren summarizes the differences between the two ages: "[In the old age] it is the rule that each is to **seek his own**, his own **power**, [his own] **promotion**, and [his own] **honor**. In the new age, each Christian **prefers others** to oneself, seeks the **common good** rather than one's individual good. [In the new age] **individual** gifts are given for the *good of the whole body* of Christ, not for the gain of the individual." [p.421]

When Paul writes to the Romans, he describes Christian **life in the new age** when “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us,” as Paul says in Rom. 5:5. This **love**, in fact, is the *constant* and *overarching theme* in our Epistle lesson, where the word occurs repeatedly throughout. Note the very first verse, verse 9: “Let love be genuine” or, as Eugene Petersen puts it in *The Message*, “Love from the center of who you are. Don’t fake it.” Loving like this is only possible for those who are “in Christ”, those who have had God’s love poured into their hearts. If we have the love of God in our hearts, we can love from the very center of our being. Now, love in this sense is not a *feeling*, but deliberate, **willful action on behalf of others**. I like the way Karl Barth puts it in his commentary, [Love is] ”to seek and to serve **the One** (capital “o”) in the **others**” [Barth, 454]. Or, as another commentator puts it, Christian love is “more than feeling; it is *being for others*.” [Kasemann, 345]. What Paul spells out as the marks of a true Christian in the rest of our Epistle lesson, then, are simply *examples* of walking in Christian love. So, let me return to three marks of the true Christian.

HOPE: “Rejoice in hope” Paul says in v. 12. The meaning of “hope” here may be *different* from what you might expect. This is why I took the time to spell out the difference between this present old age and the new age. In all his letters, Paul understands hope *in terms of the new age*. “**Hope** does not have the Greek sense of *expectation of better circumstances* [which is the way we often use the word, e.g., “I hope a vaccine for Covid-19 will soon be found”]. [Rather hope] is confident *reaching out for the eschatological future* and is thus the basis of joy even in adversity [in the present].” [Kasemann, 346] Like love, hope for Paul is not a feeling. Hope is confidence in the goodness of the future because the *new age has dawned* in Jesus. Thus, one can rejoice in any present circumstance because of hope that the good will win out in the end. Hope is a sign of true Christian behavior second only to love. If this is true, then Christians should be a *beacon of true hope* to non-Christians who are full of despair. “All will be well, all will be well, all manner of things well be well,” said Julian of Norwich. That is an expression of *true Christian hope*, hope determined by the dawn of the new age. As we enter our future together at St. A, as we live through the uncertainties of the next months of our search for a new Rector, can we share this strong hope with each other—that all will be well?

HUMILITY: “Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly” Paul writes in v. 16. Literally, in the original Greek, it means, “Do not set your mind on exalted things, but keep company with the humble.” [Barrett, 241] “Make friends with nobodies” is the way Petersen puts it in *The Message*! Again, this is following the *example of Jesus* who associated with the lowly in his society—women, tax collectors and sinners. And, in the final analysis, this is what Black Lives Matter **Also** is all about—the marginalized, the invisible ones in our society really do matter. Think *solidarity with* and *protection of* immigrants and minorities in our nation, including Native Americans. Think of affirming the equal rights of women. Or, to bring it home to St. A, who are the lowly, the marginalized, the invisible, yes, even the oppressed among us?!

Now, in the interest of full disclosure, I must confess this is probably the hardest mark of a true Christian for me to live out. I see many of you doing a much better job than I. As an educated—some would say over-educated!--privileged, economically secure, white male, my first inclination is to associate with my own kind. But then I encounter the example of Jesus, and I read the instructions of Paul, and I have to *willfully suppress* my first inclination and *choose* to do the right thing. I need the help of the Spirit to live into the behavior of the new age, where all

negative and limiting distinctions are no more, where I can celebrate the differences between members of Christ's body—the body into which I have been incorporated—where I can recognize and honor the distinctive gifts given to each of you for the good of us all. I still have quite a ways to go!

Finally, **HARMONY/ONE MIND**: “Live in harmony with one another,” Paul urges in v. 16. Literally in the original Greek this reads: “Have a common mind”! *All of us*? In our great and celebrated diversity, “have a common mind”?! C'mon Paul! Get real! But, In fact, this is a common theme in Paul's letters. Phil. 2:2: “Make my joy complete: be of the *same mind*, having the same love, being in *full accord* and of *one mind*”—a triple emphasis! In 2 Cor. 13:11, in some of the last words of counsel Paul gave the Corinthians, he writes: “Finally, brothers and sisters, ...*agree with one another*, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.” How can this be, including of us here at St. A?

Living in harmony with each other, having a common mind “does **not** mean that they must think the same thoughts, which is only seldom realized and not even desirable. It is rather a matter of *orientation to the single goal of the community* united in grace, which enables us to be of one spirit in spite of tensions, and which comes to expression in unanimity.” [Kaesemann, 347] Any haughtiness, any self-assertion will obviously break this bond of unanimity.

“Live in harmony with one another” / “have a common mind” seems particularly apropos of our situation at St. A, as we engage more fully in our search for a new Rector. We want to be *united* in our *purpose* in this place; we want to *agree* on our *mission* here in our island community and beyond; we want to *work together* to achieve God's ends for ourselves and for those closest to us on this island. So, how can we come to be of “one mind”?

Let me briefly suggest four things I hope we can do over the next few months. 1) **Pray** that we will move toward a common mind. As Paul urges us in this passage, “Persevere in prayer” (v. 12). **Praying** toward that end **will orient us** toward our common goal. 2) In whatever ways we can find, formal and informal, **share with others** what you believe is most important in terms of goals for St. A, simply giving voice to what is your deepest concern for all of us. 3) **Listen**—above all *listen* to each other as we express our deepest desires. If I am persuaded that you are genuinely listening to me, then I am much more inclined to move toward a compromise in terms of our common goals for the Christian community of grace here at St. Augustine's. 4) Keep always in view the **common good**—what is *best for all*, not just what I want, or what my circle of close friends want, but what is best for *our common life*. I believe that God will honor such a stance and give us a special portion of the Spirit to assist us in our work together.

CONCLUSION: These three marks of true Christian behavior—hope, humility, and harmony—are the true expressions of **Christian love**. They constitute a *tall order* for us. They represent the *high demands* of following Jesus with integrity. Remember that we have been incorporated into the body of Christ through our baptism. We have had the love of God poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who **enables us** to answer the call to follow Jesus. We have been urged by Paul not to be conformed to this present age, but to be transformed in order to live into the new age which dawned in the Christ-event. We will not be perfect in our answer to this call, of

course; but let us strive to be conformed to the image of Christ, conformed to the new age in ways that do not conform to this present age.

This Eucharist which Canon Joan will soon consecrate is the symbol of God's forgiveness for our falling short. And, In the body and blood made holy, we are reminded of the call to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow the Master. "I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God to present your bodies as a living sacrifice.... Do not be conformed to his age, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds."

Amen.