

Sermon – “Embracing Diversity”

Text – Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35

If there is one thing that those who follow the ways of Jesus Christ can agree on it is that we are loved by God and called to love one another. Churches and religious institutions claim in the cross, a symbol that serves as a reminder of the extent of God’s love. Paul in his letter to the Church at Rome proclaims that all the laws of Judaism are summarized in love. Judaism proclaims as the greatest of the commandments the one called the Shema, “Hear O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Deuteronomy 6:4-5.” Second to the Great Commandment is the one contained in Leviticus 19:19: “...you shall love your neighbor as yourself:”

The question then becomes what exactly does it mean to live out the core belief of our faith? How can we in the words of the motto of North Main Street become a place where love grows? I believe that the answer for how we live out the type of love revealed by God’s Word in the pages of Scripture, the lives of the Saints, the teachings of the Church, and in our experience of God in our daily lives; can be summarized in the word tolerance.

We need to be able to accept and work with those whose understanding of God’s Word is different than ours. From the very beginnings of Christianity there has been differences in how one lived out their faith.

In Rome, there were new converts to Christianity who were zealous, some would say fanatical, in living out their new faith. They would not eat any meat to avoid the possibility of being part of sacrifices to pagan gods; because of the possibility the meat being sold in the marketplace might be from an animal that was sacrificed to a pagan god. When an animal was sacrificed only a portion would be burnt on the altar, the rest would be shared with the participants and sold in the market to support the priests. They were also zealous in keeping the Sabbath holy and avoiding all work.

Others would criticize these new converts for their reliance on externals and failure to realize that their faith didn’t rely on the observance of rituals.

Paul exhorts the church to welcome the new converts and care for them, to avoid challenging their beliefs, for who are we to judge. Today as in Paul’s day it is all too easy for us to engage in heated debates over our understanding of how we are to live out our faith. Unfortunately, there have been congregations that have allowed the interpretation of a passage of Scripture or how a certain ritual should be performed cause divisions.

We need to learn to be more tolerant of one another. We need to learn how to forgive one another. Jesus presents forgiveness not as an option but as a requirement.

We need to forgive one another for the sake of the Kingdom of God. It is God’s will that we live together in peace for the sake of the advancement of the Kingdom of God. It was Jesus’ prayer as he prepared for his death on the cross that those who believe in him might be one so that the world might believe, John 17:20-21. It is difficult to testify to the power of God’s love when we are angry with one another and plotting ways to revenge the wrong done to us.

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We need to forgive one another for our own sake. For our sake, not only because of impending judgment by God; but for the sake of failure to do so upon our life here and now. The anger and desire for vengeance that consumes us when we are unable to forgive makes it impossible to fully experience God’s love. Don’t we know the truth of this the statement in the Lord’s prayer forgive us our sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us, Luke 11:4 NRSV? Haven’t we known individuals who are some filled with anger over wrongs they have suffered that it poisons their relationship with others and robs their life of all joy? As difficult as it is we need for our own sake to forgive others. It isn’t easy and it doesn’t mean that we approve of the actions of the other; but it is necessary for the sake of our own well-being. We need to be willing to forgive not just once but time and time again; even as God offers us forgiveness time after time. When Peter sought to find a way out of having to continually forgive an individual by asking if seven times was enough, Jesus answered: “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times (Matthew 18:22).” Jesus answer to Peter was that there can be no limit to how often we should forgive one another.

Today as with every sermon I don’t claim to perfectly embody what I am calling you to consider doing. Rather what I present to you on Sunday morning is the Word of God that I hear at this time, in this place. It is a product of my study of the Scripture lessons for Sunday, the teachings of the church and the Saints, my experience of God in my life, and what is happening in the world. It is my hope that it will be a blessing to you. It may be a word of comfort, of encouragement, or a call to action.

As always, I am willing to discuss my sermon or other questions about our faith with you. I hope you will feel free to ask for clarification or to challenge what I have said.

Please feel free to stop by when I am in the office, call for an appointment, or email me.