

Sept. 6, 2009

Pentecost 14 B

James 2:1-13

### **To become love**

*“You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ... So speak and act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty.” James 2:8, 12*

### **I**

Why are we here? Why do we come here... again ... and again ... to hear a few words and share a bit of bread and some wine?

Do we come to have fellowship with people like us ... people who share common backgrounds or politics or ethics or religious views? Do we come to have our religious convictions reinforced and be reassured? Perhaps we come to find respite in words of grace amid a world that is more a-tumble and rougher around the edges than we like. Maybe, as one cynic, critical of North American Christianity, suggests, we come here to give thanks and congratulate ourselves that we're not like most people in the world, since we so much better off 85 or 90 percent of those who populate the globe.

All of these reasons and more are in the mix of motives that move us out our comfortable beds on Sunday morning. Some of these reasons have spirituality validity. Not all.

But I want to suggest that there really is only one right reason to come here: Love. To know and become the Love God is.

We are created in image of God, our tradition tells us. This means we are made in the image of Love. For God is love, as the Scriptures tell us in a thousand different ways on

as many pages, until we arrive at that clearest of statements in the little book of First John that spells it out unmistakably just in case we missed it: God is love.

This means we are made by love, for love, to know love, to become love. And if we don't love, we fail the hope God has in us. But when we do, when we manage to love beyond the boundaries of those most near and dear, beyond the boundaries of family and friends, beyond the boundaries of those we like and who are like us, reaching those who may be our very opposites, it is then, for that moment, that we love as God loves. It is then that we know who we really are and for what we are made.

For we are made to live out the royal law of the heart of God: To love neighbor as ourselves. ... To love as God loves.

The book of James, so little read in many churches, is about empty profession, the kind of faith that dots all the 'I's and crosses the 'T's in the correct places, a faith that gets all its doctrine and ethics properly figured out and stated, but which refuses the struggle to love.

To say one believes and not enter the struggle to love is to hold a faith that is no longer alive, James says. It is dead, not a living faith. For we are to love as God loves.

Which, of course, we do not do.

For we are not love. We are a confusing, conflicted, contradictory mass of desire and impulse, of goodness and selfishness, of beauty and ugliness, of self interest and self giving. We know there is goodness and beauty in becoming the generosity of grace shining in the face of Christ. Yet knowing this, we resist it, especially when tempers are short, when our opinions and views are contradicted, when life doesn't go our way, when people are difficult ... and they often are.

So come here ... again and again ... to know and to become love ... to receive a grace that welcomes all we are, all we ever were or ever will be, and in the reception to grow into the expression of God's beauty we each are intended to be.

If we come for some other reason, we might find that God fights us, resists us, refuses us, disappoints us. For we come for reasons God does not choose to honor. God's holy purpose is to strip from us everything that would prevent us from receiving and becoming the Love that God is, whether that be our most cherished opinions and understandings, our ways of thinking and being ... or our 401Ks and reliance on our wealth and personal judgments that we so often divinize.

Frankly, most of the new atheism one can find on the shelves of Borders or Barnes and Noble, most of the rejection of our faith in the modern marketplace is not a refusal of Jesus ... but comes because the church looks so little like him.

## II

Our church ... the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America ... stands at a unique moment in its history. It is challenged to live out the royal law of God in its life together, and only time will tell if we can do it ... together.

The ELCA churchwide assembly recently made decisions that are quite popular with some and profoundly unpopular with others. You may have read about this in the paper or heard reports on television or radio.

The churchwide assembly is the highest legislative body in our church. It is not composed of church bureaucrats like those among whom I worked at church headquarters when my desk was at 8765 West Higgins Road in Chicago. Nor is the assembly largely bishops and clergy. They are there, but 70 percent of the assembly or more is people like you, members of ELCA congregations who love Christ and love his Church.

The assembly voted to allow congregations, who think it is faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ, to bless same-gender relationships, to perform union services, if they choose. They also voted to allow such congregations, if they choose, to call pastors who are in committed same-gender relationships. (This issue has been roiling the church for a number of years). No congregation is forced or coerced to do this. The choice belongs to each congregation.

Some argue that this diametrically and absolutely contradicts biblical condemnations of same-sex behavior. It is an unquestionable violation of God's will and biblical commands.

Others argue the biblical material mentioning same-sex behavior denounces practices that don't really relate to our situation today, where we have gay and lesbian people seeking to form life-long unions of mutual love. Others argue that Jesus showed immense and breathtaking freedom to contradict and undermine God's law and commands when doing so showed love of the neighbor. They suggest we may do the same to show love for the neighbor.

There is not just one biblical argument on this issue. There are biblical arguments, sound and powerful arguments from Scripture supporting both views, not just one or the other.

The churchwide assembly voted to allow congregations to follow their faith-formed consciences.

### III

This leaves us with tension and a challenge. We have, at St. Timothy, people who hold both of these views. We also have members who have gay and lesbian family members, some in long-term relationships who are even raising children together. The differences that exist in the broader society and the broader church aren't just out there. They are right here.

That's the tension. Here's the challenge: Can we live in love together, honoring the central purpose of our lives, the central purpose of God?

Our unity ... the unity of Christ's Church ... does not and has not ever laid in agreements or disagreements on ethical or even doctrinal positions. Our unity does not lie in political or social agreements.

Our unity is singular: the love of God in Jesus Christ. Our call is also singular: to know and be transformed by that love in all our relationships, in every circumstance ... including this one.

The royal law of the heart of God, the central purpose of life and God is to love, to love each other, to love those who agree and those who disagree, those like us and those unlike us.

And that is why we come here ... again and again ... to receive the love of God that we may become the love God intends us to be.