

PASTORAL PRAYER

God Most High, our Advent waiting and preparation leads us to this new week, this new day. On this brand new day of worship, we celebrate you, Gracious Creator, as we await the fulfillment of your promises. You have already given us so much. You gave us breath; you gave us life, and for these simple gifts, we give you great thanks. What you ask in return is mindful use of our days, faithful use of our lives, and for that, we turn to you for guidance. Whatever we are, whatever we do, wherever we go, whomever we meet, we must root our words and deeds in your gracious, real love. We realize that to say it is much easier than to live it. Help us to live your love, to be your love, to open ourselves to your love, because, we know through your Word that you are love. We pray, therefore, to be children of love as we lift up all on our hearts and minds, the tragedies of our world and of our community, as well as the celebrations we lift in joy. Hear all we lift up, Gracious Creator.

Holy God, we marvel at the gift of love that is the Christ child. Not only did you send a Messiah to us, you sent your very own Son to live among us and show us how to become your children. Gracious God, we hear the calling, the calling love others in spite of all that holds us back while, at the same time, hearing the call to love others as we call for change in the world around us. This calling is harder than we first might believe, and so we ask your strength, in the times of easy and the times of struggle, to fulfill it as the Christ taught us. We pray all these things in his Holy Name as we await his arrival, in the words he gave us...

SERMON

The other day, I went through my collection of music. The question on my mind: which one defines love the best? As I looked through various songs by Bread, the Beatles,

Men at Work, Elton John, and so forth, a couple of phrases stuck with me. “Straight from the Heart,” “All you need is love,” and so forth. All of them tell us something about what it means to love and the effects that love has on us, but none of them really tell us HOW to love. It’s just assumed, but what if it’s more than it seems?

Today, we come to the second week of Advent. We prepare ourselves and we work in the world to receive once again the gift of the Christ child. It is diligent work. At this time of the year, we remember hope, and, this week in particular, we remember love. Love is the greatest virtue of all. In fact, the bible teaches first and foremost “love covers a multitude of sins.” Love undergirds everything we do as Christians; if not, then it really isn’t faithfulness; it’s rule-following. But how do we know what is what? It sometimes seems to be one of those words that we use so often that we just assume what it means along the way. Love really is the most important thing in the Christian life, but we struggle to know how to do it well, whether you sit at in the pews or preach from the pulpit. I’ve preached so many sermons on love that when I sat down to contemplate this week’s Lenten theme, I thought to myself, “How can we talk about love in a way that we haven’t before?” Indeed; everything I just said I’m sure you’ve heard many, many times before. Not an easy thing to talk about love in new and refreshing ways, but we get that when we look at the lesson from Paul’s letter to the Philippians.

The second scripture lesson today comes from Paul’s letter to Philippi. In his introduction, he begins with a prayer for the benefit of the Philippians. He doesn’t just throw words out there; Paul’s words here are unique and important. “And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you determine what is best.” What this says right off the bat is that the Philippians aren’t

there yet. Neither are we, so we are in good company. But it's not just love; it's love with "knowledge and insight." This love makes the difference.

In this season, it's important to remember what "love with knowledge and insight" means. It's essentially the heart connected to the brain. It's love that critically thinks about what it is doing. This is love that has a wise direction; it has strength. This love has muscle; it knows when to be vulnerable and knows when to get angry. It flies in the face of our world's love. Let's face it, in today's world, love is cheap. Love is often described as something fluffy, without form. It's naively happy, and, well, it's just nice and bland. But, as we have said before, nice is not worthwhile; it's empty calories. This is not scriptural love. "Love with knowledge and insight" allows us to live as shrewd as serpents and as kind as doves because, you know, it's a complicated world we live in. This is a world where kind notions can be easily taken advantage of. Instead of naïve love, we live "love with knowledge and insight." Today, I speak of this kind of love in two directions: love that accepts exactly as one is and love that calls for change. It is selfless love and love that calls for accountability by honoring our neighbors above all.

Sometimes we struggle with how to love our neighbors. "Love your neighbor." Scripturally, it's not being nice, and it's not opening ourselves to being taken advantage of. It's all about honoring our neighbors as they are, even when they are not the best of people or people we highly disagree with. Like this: "Good morning, Vicky. I hope you have a good day (you lousy Packers fan). Well, did my good deed today. I showed her that I love her with the love of Christ." Or this: "Good morning, Connie! I hope that you have a great day. Man, she has some pretty screwed up politics, but at least I showed her the love of Christ today." Is that love? I tend not to think so. That's courtesy posing as love. There's one

phrase I have heard time and again in Christian circles that has lost all meaning: “love the sinner and hate the sin.” I don’t like it. It has been used too often to validate self-righteousness; it unnecessarily presumes that the other is a sinner, but I am not. Even so, when it is used, the sinner and the sin all too easily become one and the same, even though we use the concept to try to separate our words and intentions. It can be a sin or it can be any difference we have that allows us to separate each other.

Take this for instance: say that I prefer Coca Cola, and Penny here prefers Pepsi. For the intentions of this illustration, we will call this a sin (but it really is...to prefer Pepsi over Coke). So, being a Pepsi fan makes her a sinner. Nevertheless, she comes to worship Sundays, she prays, she seeks devotion as a Child of God. What’s more important? Is she a child of God or is she a Pepsi fan? When we make the “Pepsi fan,” the sinner part of someone what defines them in our eyes, then we have lost perspective. I will love her in spite of the fact that she is a Pepsi fan.

But that’s the problem. Take anything we might consider a sin or anything we disagree with in anyone’s world, and put that word in there for any person. It’s not as easy as preferring a different kind of cola. It could be “Republican” or “Democrat.” It could be “homosexual.” It could be “Muslim,” “Catholic,” or “Jewish.” Whatever your views on these things, we can easily make them bigger than they are. When we make that one part of the person to be the sum of a person, when we can only think of a person using that adjective, we have made the person that concept in and of itself; they are no longer a person. When I make the Hildreths out to be nothing else than Packer fans, they have lost their humanity. There is no “love the sinner and hate the sin” when that happens. It doesn’t line up with the substance of the Gospel. In Jesus’ day, “tax collector” was an easy one. So was

“prostitute.” But Jesus said, “come on board; there’s plenty of room for everyone.” He may not have loved what they did separating them from others and God, but boy, he never made their sinfulness be what they are. If we are to follow the difficult path of Jesus Christ, we cannot make one person one aspect of themselves. We don’t just accept sin, but we make love the key as the Christ commanded.

But most of all, I dislike that phrase because it seems self-righteous. It makes the other to be a sinner while not recognizing that I myself am a sinner. I am a sinner because sometimes I think ill of others. I am a sinner because sometimes I say foolish and hurtful things. I am a sinner because I often do not hear the cries of the needy but stay in my comfort zone. I am a sinner because I participate in the structures of the world that hurt others. I buy clothing that is made at a low cost by whatever brand name that virtually enslaves people to make their products cheaply. These are all sins that I have and will do again. But none of these define me as a Child of God. I am more than a sinner. I am not proud at any of my sins, but that does not take away from the fact that I love my Lord, I work to serve the Christ every day, and I want to love each person that crosses my path with the most Christ like energy I can. I don’t always do well, but I am more than that. I know each of us is a sinner in one way or another. Does anyone want to be looked down because we have sinned, to be determined to be nothing more than that part of ourselves? Of course not. As the Christ says, “Go and do likewise” to love each and every person, leaving behind everything that takes away from their personhood...even if they love they love Pepsi or the Packers. It’s what made the Good Samaritan the example to follow.

There is the love that has to focus on the person at the expense of all that bothers us. That is a selfless kind of love in the individual sense. But the greater sense requires that we

look at the world critically. Love is also about getting angry at things that are just not tolerable anymore. This last week, there was yet another public shooting in San Bernadino, California. In America, there have been more public shootings than there have been days in the year 2015. As Christians, we have been too silent about the sheer amount of public shootings. We have been too inclined to pray at the expense of speaking out when we must do both. This is an area for love. Love here requires accountability, honest working at the problem, and setting aside scapegoats to really get at the problem. No one deserves a pass, and no one group is solely the problem. It's not about any other religion, for there has been too much evil done at the expense of God's name in every religion, including Christianity. It's not just about mental illness, although our country's infrastructure needs much more care for those who suffer from significant mental illness. It's about our complacency. We have become too accustomed to hearing about yet another shooting. One of the greatest problems is those who make the problem about someone else when it's our problem to deal with. Unless we as Christian peoples stand up, it will keep going.

Therein lies the solution. This is a symptom of a greater problem in our world, and it is this that we must get at. The answer long term is love. Love destroys terrorism at its root when Christians are more about the love of God over anything else. There is such a lack of real, honest love in our world. It causes people to lash out, to think that they are serving God with violence when God commands otherwise. The problem won't be fixed immediately, and I'm not interested in debates, but nothing will get done unless our actions match our words that the status quo just isn't OK. Our calling as Christian peoples right now in love is to be angry at this and so many injustices in our world. Our calling is to stand up and say "enough is enough" with gusto and to work toward change together,

across all lines of disagreement. We must work and we must work hard. We must work across differences; we must let our love lead above anything else.

It's time, friends, for love to overflow. The world needs it more than anything else because it is the recipe for preventing the violence we see too often. It's not just any love; it's "love with knowledge and discernment." It's love with heart and mind; it's love that knows what its doing. It's love that gives all, that strives in the face of what the world knows as foolishness. Be real because only real can love. Love one another really in spite of sin, in spite of difference, in spite of everything that makes us different. Love the world by calling out the garbage that prevents us all from following the Gospel calling. Love really and truly, for that is where Christ is. Thanks be to God for this love that only grows with practice. Amen and Amen.