

Rev. George Arceneaux

9/10/2023

Pentecost 15 – Year A

Pretty regularly, I find myself talking with others about what Church is all about. It'll be with friends who are Christian as we play board games and it'll be with long time church goers. Got to talking with a fella whos been part of this church all his 99 year long life, Ed Mampre, and we got to talking about what church is about. And more often than not, whether we say it explicitly or implicitly, we come back to a pretty simple thought: It's all about love.

Our faith's simplest truth is its greatest, that God's purpose is love, that we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Yet if Christianity is as simple as love, why on earth do we need all of this? Why do we need regular worship, why do we need to care about scripture, why do we need Christianity at all? Why don't we just say that I love others and that's good enough?

Now some Christians might say the threat of hellfire is a compelling reason enough to have this religion. But I know I need this faith because it gives me something that the world around seems to struggle to acknowledge. I mean sure, the world seems to say that love matters, plenty of ads and youtube videos and tiktok feeds tug on our

heartstrings, know how to provoke our sentimentality or even stoke our rage for a cause in a couple of minutes. But despite what the world might encourage us to believe: love is not simple, nor does it meant to be short-lived.

Rather than sit in sentimentality, Jesus doesn't mention the word love once this morning. He doesn't talk about injustice, doesn't set up a good guy against a bad guy. Jesus gets into what is the scariest thing in the world for a lot of people, including myself: when we disagree with others. Those times when we're in conflict or that we fight. And he reminds us that love means being willing to risk engaging conflict with others.

I was in a staff meeting last Tuesday and we talked a little bit about this reading, and I was so thankful when Christa our children's and youth music director pointed out, man, I'm glad we have this reading because it shows that this problem of miscommunication and of conflict between each other IS NOT A NEW THING. Jesus lays out how conflict between two people in a church is to be navigated. I mean, Jesus basically nails modern systems theory right outside the gate for making a healthy community: if you have a problem with someone, the best thing is very, very often to address it directly with the other person. And while we might parse the strategy Jesus speaks about this morning on conflict, the point he makes is that conflict does and will happen. And that dealing with conflict isn't always easy or straightforward.

Which is amazing to me. In a world of polarized politics, 24-hour media which stokes fear and opinionated rage, and of the internet, we are incentivized to never have to actually be with the people we disagree with. Or are angry with. For our opinions and likes and desires, we can go to our own niche forums or the Facebook pages which have determined what will engage us the most but will challenge us the least. We live in a world that not only permits us but encourages us to find our camp and stay away from others. It makes an environment in which loving others who are different from us isn't just difficult; it becomes almost impossible.

Love is not particularly conducive to the age of the internet. But just has always been the case, the world needs it. And one of the most amazing things about the church is that it means that we come together each week and see each other, even when we might be angry with one another. How many places encourage that kind of thing? The kind of love that reminds us to face our sins and mistakes and the people we hurt, and to say that we are sorry. And learn how to rightly relate to them.

And that work can be terrifying. But I think that's what we have our Paul reading this morning. Because he reminds us that for all the hurt and messiness of relationship with others, it's all about that simple truth that God has always called us to. Love. That our relationships and ourselves aren't neat and tidy; they're often rough and raw. But we can still love in the midst of one another's imperfections.

That's one of the reasons I'm excited about that craft we've got set up in the parish hall: that banner that I hope we'll have hung below the rood next week. With as many people from this church putting their mark on it, I don't think it'll look uniform. I doubt it'll look neat and tidy, I don't think it'll look like one person or even just one group's particular vision. I think it's gonna be messy and different and even weird in some places. But I also think it's gonna be beautiful because it'll be us. For all our problems and talents and love, it'll be us. And I can't imagine the God of Love wanting anything better hanging up in this house of worship.