

Thomas R. Cook
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota
8:00 and 10:00 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist
The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost; September 3, 2017

“Let Love be Genuine”

Scripture: Romans 12:9-21; 12 Pentecost A RCL; Proper 17

I remember a time long ago when I was a boy, sitting with my grandparents in the living room of their home, but I wasn't so little that they were particularly concerned with my presence while they sipped their morning coffee and got entangled in one of the frequent “lovers' spats” for which they had become, at least in my eyes, mildly famous over the years. Over sixty years of marriage gives ample time to hone this particular skill, and my grandfather could take most anything my grandmother could say and turn it somehow into an argument. And there would inevitably come the elevated voices, the exasperated statements, the series of *humps* and sighs, and then finally, “Oh, come on, Walt!” and “By God, Lucille!”

And though I do not remember the morning's particular topic for sparring, I do remember that this was one of their more epic battles, and my longsuffering grandmother had some pretty choice words for my grandfather right then and there with me in the room. And my face turned a bit red with embarrassment, and I couldn't really take the heat anymore. So, as my grandmother rose from her chair to make her blustery exit from the room ---and in this way claim at least some margin of

victory--- I chuckled and interjected, “Oh, come on, Grandmom. You really do love Granddad, don’t you?” And I guess I was expecting some reassuring answer for the anxious grandson, right? Instead she looked right at me and said without a hint of insincerity, “Sometimes, Tommy, I just really don’t know.” And she walked out of the room.

Well, my resulting childhood insecurities and existential family dilemma didn’t last for too long, thank God. This was one scene in a much larger play, and thinking things over the next couple of days, I recognized that neither this momentary argument, nor whatever true sins might have come between them, ever pressed my grandparents apart. They remained faithful to one another to the end... bumps, bruises, spats, laughter, satisfactions, joys and all. For the times my grandmother *did* know about love far outweighed the times when she “...just really didn’t know.” And that was not by accident. That was her faith. Their relationship was the center of my grandparents’ work together. It was their life. And they were familiar with these words:

“Let love be genuine,” Paul says. “...hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.”

Let love be genuine. And what is it to be genuine? Honest, frank, open, sincere, candid, unpretentious, persevering, hopeful, true. What my grandmother said to me that morning long ago was quite genuine, and I know now her frustration was born of love. Her exasperation, her uncertainty, her anger even... these things were true. But a genuine love absorbs such things and puts them in their proper places. They are part of the experience, but not the whole of love. Love leads one around again to kindness. Love restores honor for one another. Though love need not forever suffer foolishness, it will, in patience, seek the good, renew it, and nurture it. Understand I am not advocating for my grandparents' bickering. They lived awfully close to one another for a long time, and you've probably heard the old adage that I always share with couples who come to me for marriage, that "...you step on the feet of the ones with whom you dance the closest." I'm not advocating for my grandparents' bickering; I'm advocating for their reconciliation, their patience, their ability to be together in times of joy and pain, their inevitable restoration of hope and of love. Their love, while suffering the times of uncertainty, was genuine.

When Paul asks us to be genuine in love for each other, I don't really think he thought it would be easy. His admonitions aren't just some trite sermon for romantics and lovers. No, this is good stuff for any of us who would try to lead a faithful life and live well with each other. This is good advice for any who would lead at all. This is good advice for all relationships. Feelings can shift like the winds

sometimes, so it takes a good while ---a rooted, centered good while--- to learn to love. Love has the strength, as Paul says, to "...bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. [Love has the strength to] rejoice with those who rejoice, [to] weep with those who weep. To live in harmony with one another...

Now, apply that teaching to what has been happening lately in our world while it seems that violence and wars and riots and racial disparity and injustice are having their day. We can expect to have our differences with others, but love would call us to some very peculiar and different responses. Blessing the persecutors? (Perhaps we shouldn't knock it before we try it...) Feeding the enemy? Not seeking vengeance? Doing good in the face of evil? Yet that is what Paul tells us will bring us to love. Overcome evil not with evil, but with good.

And apply what Paul teaches in our own lives. (Richard Foster, a Quaker theologian, has said that while there are many people out there who want to work to change the world, there are far fewer who want to do the hard and consistent work of changing themselves.) When hurt or dishonesty or disappointments take their toll, what is our response? It is always to work for mutual affection. Do what is honorable. Hold fast to the good. I know this doesn't mean others must treat us in the same way. I know everything won't go as we would have hoped. I know this won't prevent hurt and hardship. Life brings such things our way. But love is the

best thing we have to get us through these times, to provide strength, to increase faith, to provide peace, and to restore affection. It's what Jesus chose to do. It's the way we are called to go.

My grandparents did have some hard times in their long life together, but through it all they were truly blessed. And on the day we buried my grandmother, I saw my grandfather cry. And he cried... but only until he began to laugh and to smile at the memory of his wife of so many years. And I think I know why. He more fully understood something of genuine love.