

The Rev. Thomas W. Allen
26th July, A.D. 2009
8th Sunday after Pentecost
Ephesians 4:1-7; 11-16

“Solitude, humility, self-denial, action and contemplation, the sacraments, the monastic life, the family, war and peace—none of these make sense except in relation to the central reality which is God’s love living and acting in those whom He has incorporated in His Christ. Nothing at all makes sense, unless we admit, with John Donne, that: ‘No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.’”

The words of Thomas Merton, from his book *No Man is an Island*. Christians are not meant to fly solo—to do their own thing, to forget the rest. After the talk I gave last week, to bring you up to date on some

disturbing trends in the American Episcopal Church, it was refreshing to see the lesson for this week. A reminder of a calling for unity—unity in the body of Christ.

Ephesians 4:4-6 reads: “There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”

But, you may plead, how can a body be unified when the disagreements run so deep and cut the very life, the very vine, that sustains us? Well, it can’t be unified in that way. In a temporal way. Two completely opposite viewpoints will not unify anytime soon.

Only God can unfold His plans for us in His timing. But meanwhile, we must remember our calling as a body of Christ, and that if some choose not to remember, that is not our problem, so to speak. We continue to pray and speak the truth in love, but we can't force others to do what is right. But we can look at ourselves and we can choose to do what is right—both as individuals and as a body. And what is right is always what Christ calls us to do.

We are called--not to live unto ourselves, but unto Christ in service of others. With meekness, patience, lowliness, forbearance, and in love. St. Paul reminds us that regardless of what is happening in the world beyond our control, beyond the chaos and

confusion, there is an undercurrent....a calling. The call is to the church as a whole, not just to us individually. St. Paul, while sitting in prison, asks the church to lead a life that is worthy of the calling of our faith. How are we to do this?

We do this by (1) examining our treatment of others/our willingness to unify and (2) participating in the Eucharist.

Our treatment of others.

One of the hardest things to do is to be a humble and meek person. Meek means “enduring injury with patience and without resentment.” Now, you may say to yourself that you adore these virtues, but come on, who can

really live in total humility and meekness? And to be humble is to not be proud or haughty; not arrogant or assertive. It is to be—there's that word again—meek.

When we talk about our treatment towards others, our ability to love the unlovable, we need a lot of help, don't we? But notice how Paul does not placate our personal feelings. He does not care if we think that we cannot be in communion with this person or that person who may have offended us. This often stretches our own human ability. No one likes to admit that they have offended a brother or sister in the Lord if that means giving up a place of position or power. But, this is exactly what we do when we are baptised, when we profess the faith,

and come to the partake of the holy mysteries of the body and blood of Christ.

We read Paul's admonition to be one--that is to live as one, have concern for our fellow church members--it means that true kindness is built upon love. We don't always love a person because we get some kind of pleasure out of loving them—or because we get something from them. When I officiate weddings, I always have a favorite quote that sums up the commitment of marriage in an honest way. C.S. Lewis said, in reference to marital love, “If it's all about love, then why do we need the promise?”

We promise to love, even when we don't feel like it. That is our promise

as Christians, as well. Whether single, married, celibate, whatever—we promise to love one another. Notice I don't emphasize like one another! It is impossible to like everyone, but it is possible, through Christ, to love. And to speak the truth in love.

We don't love based upon the other persons response to our actions either. It is important to remember we are to give grace to others; it is a two-way street—and we always have a choice to either extend grace, or turn away altogether. If we turn away, we may miss out on the blessing that comes when two people love, forgive, and offer grace for the sake of Christ. If the grace is not accepted, you leave it to Christ.

Love often requires us to be lowly, to be meek, to have patience with one another, and to be eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. This unity takes place in communion with each other in Church. The basic reason why everyone in this room is lovable--despite our quirks--is simply because God made us and finds each one of us lovable. Worthy of love.

Bishop Fulton Sheen said, “One of life’s greatest joys comes from loving those whom no one else loves...[and in doing so we promote a kindness] towards the afflicted which becomes compassion, “which means a suffering with, or an entering into the distress and the pains of others as if they were our own.” This is what moves the body

of Christ to give-- whether it is in the form of alms, the giving of one's talent, or the giving of our time. When we do this as the body of Christ, our interests are enlarged beyond our own interest. Then, as the body of Christ seeks to love God, to love our neighbour as ourselves, the bond of peace springs forth to the glory of God.

Being created in God's image makes us image bearers of his love. He has deposited his love in us and it is through baptism, confirmation, partaking of the sacraments, believing in Christ as Lord and Saviour so that we can find others truly lovable. And in these sacraments is the way we are saying to each other- I have been transformed. Not by my action, but by

Jesus' action on the cross. It is through transformation that I can really love those who I see as not lovable but are lovable because Christ accepts me. We are to be a people who bear one another's infirmities. And we are to do this without endless fault finding and without magnifying the other person's problems.

So, one way we answer the call to lead a life worthy of the calling of our faith is not to love unto ourselves, but unto Christ in service of others, to love as Christ loved us.

Another way we answer the call to lead a life worthy of the calling of our faith is to participate in the Eucharist.

When we come to the chancel rail, we come with awe. We come with reverence to receive the body and blood of Christ. That token is placed in our hands and placed upon our lips. It is God touching us and giving us his love. It is a reminder that God is at work--this sacrament--not given by the Church or a priest--but given by our Lord. When we partake of the sacrament, we are discerning the body of Christ. We are making a faith commitment, a faith statement, and a commitment to our brothers and sisters in Christ. What we are saying is that “we are striving to live a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called.” The calling of our faith which Paul speaks can be found in the Communion Prayer. “And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, our selves,

our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto thee...”

Everything that we are, everything that we have, the calling of our faith is about our Lord. We live for the body of Christ. You see, the gifts on the Lord’s table, bread and wine symbolize not only our Lord’s sacrifice of His body and blood; they also represent our own life and labor and all the we possess. Thus, in a wondrous and indescribable way, the Eucharist unites us in the memorial of our Lord’s sacrifice in his body. Here, at the table of the Lord we are humbled, united in our weakness to become strong in His one time sacrifice-His mystical body which empowers the Church to be one, compassionate, and lovable.

We are called. Not to live unto ourselves, but unto Christ in service of others. With meekness, patience, lowliness, forbearance, and in love.

“From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”

Ephesians 4:16

May we truly love one another as Christ truly loves us. Amen.