

The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
The Reverend John H. Brock

Saturday, September 3, 2005  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20

Grace to you and peace, from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

It has been quite a week! Now we **had** plenty of warning, we **knew** that it was coming; we couldn't really get out of the way of it. We tried to figure out the worst case scenarios, which of course are never the ones that actually happen, and because of the events that transpired there has been some tension and even some drama. I am, of course, talking about our semi-annual staff retreat that happened this last week. This is the time when Pastor Hardy and Pastor Easton and the vicar, Peter Fox, Tim Koch, Debbie Wilson, Christopher Couch and I all get together for two days. We look at the next six months. We try to figure out what holidays are coming up, what Holy Days are coming up, and what's going on with the education program. We look at what the Youth Group is doing is going to affect the activities of the congregation, either positively or negatively. We look at what concerts are going to happen and whether THEY will positively or negatively affect our other congregational activities. And of course, we look at thing like weddings, preaching schedules, education events and so on. We did have some conflicts. Some of them we were able to resolve. We tried to NOT be at an impasse, but always look for a solution. We weren't successful 100% of the time, but we were successful MOST of the time.

That seems to be the way things go with much of church life. We will have conflicts in our lives as a congregation. Some of us will want to do things one way and some of us will want to do them another way. And, well of course, my way is right and your way is wrong. But, that is beside the point, but we'll try to figure it out so we can see my point of view. We struggle over property issues; we struggle over money issues; we confront one another about worship issues. Sometimes - hopefully most times - we as brothers and sisters in Christ can work together and come to an equitable solution, some way to learn to live together with one another.

It happens in our personal lives, it happens in our congregational lives, it even happens to us as a denomination. Just this last August we had our every other year church wide gathering, and there they discussed issues that we have discussed here. These are issues that we as a denomination have been talking about for, in some cases, several years. The folks who met in Orlando made decisions about whom we ordain; they made decisions about whose unions we will bless; they even got into that debate that at one time was such a sore issue here at our own congregation: NEW PRINTED worship books.

Now whether or not I personally agree with the decisions that were made, I personally, as a member of this larger church body, am struggling to learn how to live together with those whom I don't agree. And hopefully those with whom I don't agree are striving to do the same.

That's what I believe Paul is talking about as we heard in the words to the Romans tonight. Starting about chapter 12, Paul is working at reminding the Romans that regardless of whatever kind of differences they might have as believers, for Paul and the churches in Rome, it was more ethnic heritage than anything else. Ethnic heritage as in the way we used to do things: "Well, we've always done it that way before." (Didn't know there were Lutherans in Rome 2000 years ago, did you?) "We've always done it that way," was their theology, and Paul is saying, "No, listen: as brothers and sisters in Christ we need to learn how to live together. As brothers and sisters in Christ we need to learn how to be that witness of God's love to everyone."

Let me read it in a slightly different translation in what Lois read to us a few moments ago. This is from The Beck Translation; "Don't owe anybody anything but to love one another. If you love the other person, you have kept the law, the commandments. Don't commit adultery, don't murder, don't steal, don't covet and any others are summed up in this. Love your neighbor like yourself. Love does no wrong to another person. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law. Do this especially since you know the time in which we are living in. It is time now for you to wake up from sleep, for we are now nearer being rescued than when we first believed. The night is almost over and the day is dawning. Then let us put away the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us live nobly as in the daytime, not carousing or getting drunk, not sinning sexually or living wild, not quarreling or being jealous, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and don't plan to have your fleshly desires aroused. Don't seek to do wrong to other believers, but strive to learn to live together."

Especially as we remember the words from Matthew as I tried to explain in the children's message a few moments ago, that Christ calls us to learn to live with one another. To resolve our conflicts in as peaceful a way as possible. That we need to learn to live together and therefore there are certain ways that we treat each other, there are ways that we as human beings, ways as believers in which we learn how to deal with each other. It is a better way of thinking. One that, to use a very recent example, DOES NOT involve looting a store to get a flat screen television or trying to hi-jack a plane that is coming with relief supplies. Those are examples of how not to live with one another.

Perhaps on a much broader national scale, (the one in which you probably thought I WAS referring to as I began a few moments ago) we've seen how the different levels of our government have responded to the disaster of Katrina in Louisiana. The local government was very quickly overwhelmed, the state government over-work, and unfortunately it appears that our national government was a bit slow in responding. Some of those folks strove to learn how to live together in those very trying times. Others responded extremely selfishly and dangerously.

Now perhaps it is not right for me to make judgments of a situation that I have not lived through, but how do we respond in those times of stress? Do we respond with love and care trying to help each other, or do we respond with a "me-first" attitude?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor and theologian who was killed in the Second World War, wrote a book, "*The Cost of Discipleship*" and in his book Bonhoeffer makes the case that an enemy can only be overcome by love. Jesus does not allow the Christian to return hostility for hostility; in fact, the greater the hatred, the greater the love must be for the hater. In loving the enemy it means to "serve that enemy in all things without hypocrisy and with utter sincerity. No sacrifice which a lover would make for his own beloved is too great for us to make for our enemy." writes Bonhoeffer. He reminds us that the love for an enemy is a hallmark of discipleship – this love is the fulfilling of the law and a sign of obedience to Christ.

That is what Paul reminds us. That is what the words from Matthew bring to us. The reminders that we, too, are called in our work life, in our family life, in times of peace or in times of great stress; we are called to live that witness life, to put - not me - to put **Christ** first. That is what discipleship life is about. The life in which Paul told us that we "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ" and we learn how to wear Christ honorably.

Amen.