



“Faith in Action”

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Saturday and Sunday, September 2 and 3, 2017

All Services

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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

Romans 12:9-21; Psalm 26:1-8; Matthew 16:21-28

Grace and peace be to you from our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Well this past week I got to spend some time at Saint Augustine's House, the Lutheran monastery that is located in Oxford, Michigan, it's actually the only Lutheran Monastery in North America. What I love about it is time gets to slow down, as you can spend the time in prayer and in study. The monastery holds the seven traditional pray offices or services through the course of the day. The first one starts at 5:10 in the morning, that's my favorite one! Most of the services focus on the reading or chanting of the Psalms, and in a week, one would go through all 150 Psalms that we have in the Bible. Each Psalm begins with something called an antiphon, the name of which literally means to return sound.

An antiphon is a phrase or verse before the Psalm, it kind of summarizes the main idea of that Psalm and it's also repeated after the Psalm as well.

Think of it like a liturgical version of the sound bite. The sound bite that was coined in the 1970's with the shortening of TV news, usually in connection with politics and politicians who were looking for that one hippy phrase that kind of get out so that people would remember what they were saying. It is the essence of what the person is trying to say, memorable words that set the tone and spirit of what they're trying to communicate. But sound bites have really been around for quite a long time, even before the 1970's. FDR had a memorable one "The only thing we have to fear is . . . fear itself," or JFK, "Ask not what your country can do for you . . . ask what you can do for your country." You know these already. Ronald Reagan, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this . . . wall." Sometimes the sound bites are in the movies, Dirty Harry, "Go ahead . . . make my day," or Darth Vader in Star Wars, "Luke . . . I am your father," if you haven't seen the series, sorry to do that. Or Jack Nicholson in A Few Good Men, a movie about duty, honor and truth, "You can't handle the truth." Who could forget these pivotal phrases in politics and culture.

In our reading, today we have the apostle Paul's version of the antiphon or of the sound bite, short memorable phrases that speak to Christian life and action. Paul offers a no-nonsense vision of what does it mean to be a Christian. In the first eleven chapters

of his letter to the Romans, he is telling the Romans that God's grace is for all of them, and now he's answering the question, "how do I live out that life of grace?" And he does so in twenty-three separate imperatives or commands. These are not suggestions that Paul is offering. He's telling the Romans what they need to do to be faithful Christians.

A couple of weeks ago I preached a sermon on God's Mercy and how can we be merciful. In his letter to the Romans, Paul tells us how we can live that and how we can be merciful. And the language is simple and clear, sound bites of Christian moral living. And notice it all starts with love. "Let your love be genuine," Paul says.

The word "genuine" literally means in the Greek "un hypocritical" - don't pretend, he says. And this can be a problem for a lot of people today. What if I really don't like the person? How can I love them? And if I'm commanded to love them, how can I try to believe that I do, doesn't that make me a hypocrite?

It reminds me of a pastor who I heard that when confronted by people who would tell him they didn't go to church because it was full of hypocrites, he would say to them, well one more won't hurt the mix.

For Paul though, 'love' is more about what people do, than about how they feel. It's more about your actions rather than your opinions of another person.

Our love is to different from the way the world views 'love', our love must be *genuine*—not fake, not I am going to smile at you and then talk about you behind your back.

For Paul, love is about being different and it's about being radical. The love that Paul is talking about is Jesus' love. It hates evil, it holds fast, the word in Greek there means glue. It holds fast to the things that please God that God cares about. We are to care and to love one another . . . no, even more than that Paul says, you are to outdo one another in showing honor to each other. How's that?

This is nothing less than passionate, determined, spirited, service to God and to people—that's what the church is meant to be.

"Rejoice in hope," Paul says, "Be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer." Our Christian life is to be cruciformed, shaped like a cross. It is both vertical in our praise and worship of God as we connect with God through the power of prayer. But it's also horizontal—living out a life of service and care for God and neighbor and world. That's what Jesus means by giving of one's self and taking up the cross.

Paul gives another sound bite—care for the stranger, bless and care for your enemies, those who might seek to do you harm.

In life, there are a great many things that are evil, but there are even more things that are good.

And these are tough commands for to hear. Dealing with annoying people in our lives can be difficult, the obnoxious neighbor or the pain in the behind parishioner (well, not you!) Or what about the person who represents a foreign or hostile culture. Aren't we supposed to fear and hate our enemies, or at least be a little suspicious of them?

When we were living in Enola, our Muslim neighbors, Mohammed and Prezia, who lived across the street decided to move to Texas after their children were bullied and someone put a political sign and a large kitchen knife in their front yard. This postal carrier and ESL teach, a husband and wife who lived in Central Pennsylvania for fourteen years, were seen as enemies, and it's hard to love our enemies.

But Paul really is saying the same thing as Jesus said by the way. Love your enemies. And in doing so we model Christ who called his disciples to love their enemies. Again, Paul is calling us to Christian action—love, peace, harmony, community—these are Christian principles of faith and life in action. When someone has sinned against you, take a deep breath, think, pray.

You and I can stop the cycle of revenge and retribution that has destroyed so many nations, communities, families, and even churches. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran pastor who fought against the Nazi's wrote in his book The Cross of Discipleship, "When the urge to retaliate evil with evil is completely renounced," he says, "Then evil cannot achieve its goal of creating more evil; it remains alone."

Let God be the one who judges. He will not disappoint. "Vengeance is mind," says the Lord, "I will repay." Trust in God ultimately will ensure that his justice is done. Evil is overcome with good.

Can you handle the Truth?!

Love, forgiveness, mercy, kindness should be our modes of operating with each other in the world. If it's not, confess and seek transformation. That's live in God's church.

And we should act with one another as a close-knit family. The word that Paul uses is Koinonia, a tight community of believers around the things that matter to God.

And don't underestimate your ability to love and the impact that it will have on another. Before Mohammed and Prezia moved they brought over to us two presents. One for myself and one for Linda because we were the only neighbors that would actually talk to them and ask them how they were and how the kids were doing in school. A smile, a touch, a word or act of encouragement or kindness can change a life.

And it can change the church too.

Love. Genuine love is the engine of a healthy and vibrant church. Love is the power, that empowers us to mission and ministry and care for neighbor. Love determines our character as the body of Christ, his church. Love makes forgiveness possible, it makes mercy possible, it makes charity possible.

Love gives us the hope to become the people that God imagined we would become,
a people of faith in action. Amen.

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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