

The Rev. Dr. David K. McIntosh  
August 8, 2021- 11th Sunday After Pentecost, 14B  
Given at St. Mark's Church, Bridgewater

2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33; Psalm 130; **Ephesians 4:25-5:2**; John 6:35, 41-51

**“Therefore be imitators of God... live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” †**

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*Live in love...* when I was a young boy, one of my favorite songs to sing at Church was called: “They will know we are Christians” ... it had a native American beat and proclaimed: ‘We are ONE in the Spirit, we are ONE in the Lord... and we pray that our unity will one day be restored... and they’ll know we are Christians by our love!’

We live in a world filled with human pettiness... filled with conflict. Even within the Church there is scandal and schism, and within our own parish there are times when we lose our patience with one another, or even our tempers, because somehow we’ve been hurt or we feel we’re right. During our wonderfully successful sales and events here at St. Mark’s, there were times when patience was lacking. And I know personally, that at meetings I’ve been part of at work and with others in our Diocese, I’ve become frustrated and even petulant over the fact that other people don’t see things my way!

And so, we hear today from the author who spoke so clearly to the Ephesians, and now to us... as Christians we are not simply called to worship Christ, but through the Holy Spirit to imitate Christ in our own behaviors, to be Christ’s Body in the world. We are to ‘live in love, as Christ loved us.’ In other words, we should check our egos at the door.

We are part of an incarnational Church, we believe that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us... and we also believe that the Word made flesh is still among us, the Bread of Life lives on among us, here and now, as we worship together, receive the sacrament of communion, and when we walk outside those doors.

As members of this Body, we are called to imitate Christ... but it’s not about phony mimicry or an appeal to a simple formula like, “What would Jesus do?”

According to the Pauline author, we’re to grow together in the Holy Spirit, and deliberately live in love, the kind of love Christ showed us. We are to love one another, encourage one another, and forgive one another. Instead of gossip, there should be kindness; instead of anger, forgiveness; instead of conflict, peace; instead of self-interest, there should be love.

We were just told, “Do not let the Sun go down on your anger” ... do not let the Sun go down on your worry... do not let the Sun go down on your fear. The message is that negative behavior hurts the one doing it... perhaps as much as it hurts the community to which he/she belongs. “Live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us... a sacrifice to God.” True sacrifice involves giving up a part of oneself. The Hebrew word for sacrifice means, “to make Holy, through fire.” The Pauline

message to us is that sacrifice involves being made Holy, being burned, and being transformed. It's about giving up our own self-perceptions... and giving ourselves fully to God, so that we may be transformed and become one Body... the Bread of Life to the world!

A Spiritual Director is someone who helps us along our journey to follow God's path, by listening, Praying with us, counselling, and by example. Sometimes I think my best spiritual directors have been my pets... Because they remind me of what is really important in life. When I am most tired, most cranky (as I was this past Friday evening), when I'm in conflict about whether I should drive for hours to a meeting, they remind me of what matters most. My cat will jump up in my lap, put her head on top of me and force me to stop everything and take a nap. She tells me, "Let's just rest!" Of course, I know this is more about her own self-interests and desire to get attention and be scratched, after all, she's a cat... but it changes my mood. Perhaps a better example of spiritual direction was my dog, who passed away several years ago. When I would get terribly distracted and forget about him, involved in my work or other personal interests, when I'd forget to play with him or take him for his walk, when I'd get home very late, he never held a grudge. He remained happy, and loving, and hopeful that I'd remember he was there and that he loved me. (That's why I need to get another dog!) He displayed a form of unconditional love that was not overwhelmed by worry, or conflict, or distractions. He was 'free' because he easily forgave and continued to love, no matter what. In that sense, he was probably my best spiritual director, reminding me to love as Christ loved, to forgive and remain open to others. And we, who are the Body of Christ in this world, have been called to imitate Christ, to 'live in love.' To learn from one another, to help one another, to encourage one another, and when we need to, forgive one another.

Humans have always been concerned about what they need to do to get on God's good side. But we know that God's grace is free and not earned by us. Indeed, the prophets have told us there is no need for sacrifice or burnt offering. Because of the love of Christ, God's grace is freely given, allowing the power of the Spirit to help us mature as Christian people in the world, to love others and love our neighbors as ourselves. "For we are one in the Spirit, one in the Lord... and they'll know we are Christians by our love!" Although God does not require sacrifices... if our God did require sacrifices, love is the most fragrant offering our God could ever receive, and love is the finest gift we can ever give others, and in doing so, it's the finest gift we will ever give ourselves!

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