

## 1.15.2017 Epiphany 2 – Romans 12:6

Have you ever noticed as we read the Epistle and the Gospel – that the Epistle readings speak mainly about Christian conduct and how to live a Christian life? As you look through the prayer book you don't find too much about grace and forgiveness in the Epistle readings; just a lot of instruction on how to live as a Christian. Imagine for just a moment, a service with just an Epistle reading – no Gospel. How uncomfortable, how anxious would you feel to just hear so much explicit direction on how you should live your life – without the grace and peace that come from the words of Jesus? It would be a burden too heavy to bear (Acts 15:5-10). There is certainly a place for both the Epistle and the Gospel, for the Epistle can be seen as the words of Saints – calling us to present ourselves as “a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God;” (Romans 12:1) and the Gospel, as the unimaginable miracle that makes us “holy, acceptable unto God.”

The season of Epiphany allows us an opportunity to embrace the difference between the commandments we hear in the Epistle and the miracle revealed to us in the Gospel, because this season is all about Jesus allowing His miraculous, divine nature to shine through His human nature. As the Epistle readings continue to call us to do the seemingly impossible, things such as: “live peaceably with all men, to avenge not ourselves, if our enemy is hungry – to feed him, if he thirsts – to give him drink, and to overcome evil with good” (Romans 12); it is the Epiphany Season Gospels that are the accounts of miracles; the visit of the Magi, Jesus in the Temple as a twelve-year-old, His Baptism, and the wedding at Cana where He turned water into wine. The miracles and signs in these Gospel readings were each intended to demonstrate that Jesus was God in human flesh. Just as the Christmas season emphasized the true human nature of Jesus, Epiphany emphasizes the true divine nature of Jesus. We don't want to lose track of either one.

So, as we read these Epistles we look for the Epiphany meaning of these lessons in Christian conduct. Just as the Gospels show us that God is truly present in the man Christ Jesus, the Epistles instruct us as to how we might show that God is truly present in

each one of us - and demonstrate that we are, in fact, genuinely His people; and this morning we are shown by Paul how faith in Christ demonstrates its existence, truth, and reality in our conduct. Listen to these words from our Epistle this morning: "Let love be without dissimulation. Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good. Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honor preferring one another; not slothful in business, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing instant in prayer, distributing to the necessity of the saints, given to hospitality." (Romans 12: 9-13)

As we listen to Paul speaking to us about the way a Christian should act, we need to remember that he's not simply trying to alter our behavior. What Paul is saying here is that these are the actions that flow from the Holy Spirit working in our lives, from genuine faith in Christ, and knowing exactly what it is that we believe. Take the first thing in the list: **"Let love be without dissimulation."** This means that we are to love one another genuinely - without faking it. Now, that sounds good, but what if we just don't feel all that much love toward those around us - or toward a specific person? That's where doctrine comes in - that is, knowing exactly what it is that we believe.

Love - agape - that love of God for man and man for God is not just a feeling. It's an act of will. Consider this: Do you think God the Father "felt" love for all of mankind? Our understanding of feelings and human emotions, scientifically, tells us that our "feelings" are mainly chemical responses to life's events. Often we feel pleasure or anger due to hormones and chemicals released by the brain or at the brain's instruction. God is a spirit, and so He doesn't have chemically driven human feelings. His love toward us is deeper, and centered in His will, His intellect, and His compassion, not in some shallow, chemically-induced emotion.

Did God, in the person of Jesus Christ "feel" love toward us? Yes, but His "feeling" experience of that love included beatings, humiliation, large nails being driven through His hands and feet, and the torment of the cross. That's a huge part of what this

agape love felt like for Him. Any warm and comforting emotions would have been driven far off by the trauma of the Passion. What held it together was agape. Agape is the love of will and intellect and compassion. Agape is the love that focuses on the needs of another, and intelligently calculates and plans to meet those needs, even at the greatest personal expense. That's the story of the Cross of Jesus Christ, as St. Peter said (1 Peter 2:24), "He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed." Agape is the love that redeemed us from our sin, rescued us from death and hell, and gave to us the hope and promise of eternal life.

When we love this way - without faking it, without hypocrisy, without dissimulation - we love from our will first, and the emotions can follow later - or not. It just doesn't matter. As followers of Jesus Christ we are called to love as God has loved us, intelligently focused on the needs of the ones we love, spending ourselves and our resources for their sake. Love costs - and true faith is rooted in love - love for God and love from God. A sincere Christian, full of genuine faith, does not count the cost of love, but only recognizes the benefit to the ones they love.

The rest of Paul's list follows the same pattern of action based on genuine faith. He says, "**Abhor that which is evil; cling to that which is good.**" God is good, so we are good as well. Evil is the denial of God, so we, who are good, "**abhor evil**" - we see it as the destructive enemy that it is. In this world we must always oppose evil and abhor anything that seeks to destroy God, His work, His Word, or His people.

Paul tells us: "**Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love.**" We have been adopted into Christ's family, and this family counts more than life itself. We've all heard the saying "blood is thicker than water" and it is the blood of Christ that has made us brothers and sisters. We "**honor and prefer one another**" as part of that love. We want to see each other succeed. We want to help each other thrive. We put each other first. When Paul says: "**Not slothful in business**" he simply means that we are deliberate about these actions, because we

know it doesn't flow naturally, or often feel right and good to our flesh - so we are deliberate about living in the light of the Gospel, in the joy of forgiveness, in the certainty that (1 Peter 2:11) we are "strangers and pilgrims here" - that heaven is our home. **"Fervent in spirit"**, means that we believe what we confess - that nothing else matters anywhere nearly as much as "loving God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength; and loving our neighbor as ourself." (Luke 10:27)

So, Paul says, **"Serve the Lord"**, and we do. In all that we do, we serve Him. That's where the first part of our Epistle reading applies, which says: **"Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophecy according to the proportion of faith; or ministry, let us wait on our ministering; or he that teacheth, on teaching; or he that exhorteth, on exhortation: he that giveth, let him do it with simplicity; he that ruleth, with diligence; he that sheweth mercy, with cheerfulness."** We use what God gave us in the light of our faith. We do whatever we can do, whatever the Lord lays before us to do, as though we are giving it all to Him as an offering. That's how we love God, since He needs nothing from us, we live for others as our act of love for Him. When we serve others, we are serving Almighty God; and as God lays things before us to do out in the world, we are to do them with all our might for His glory. In doing so, we allow others to see Him shining through us, just as the miracles of Jesus allowed His divinity to shine through His humanity.

Paul tells us, **"rejoice in hope."** If you believe in death and hell, and genuinely believe that you have been rescued from it - you just can't help but rejoice in hope. It is that hope and an eternal perspective that allows us to be **"patient in tribulation."** We know that God has not left us alone. He doesn't expect us to do this all by ourselves. He has given us His very real presence, He has given us the right and privilege of prayer, and he has given us one another and called us to be generous with one another - **"distributing to the necessity of the saints."**

Finally, the Scripture tells us to be **"given to hospitality."** We don't do hospitality the same way in every generation - we can't,

but we must recognize hospitality is the most treasured social grace. In the ancient world, people welcomed visitors. They took the stranger into their home and placed them under their protection just as Lot did in the book of Genesis for the angels that came to see about Sodom (Genesis 19). This is what hospitality looked like in their generation, and while welcoming a stranger into your home isn't prudent in our culture, if we are to have any hope of living the Christian life the Epistles call us to live there is one Man we must welcome into our home - the God-Man, Jesus Christ. In the book Revelation we hear Him say, "Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me" (Revelation 3:20).

His words bring us back to where we began: the difference between the commandments we hear in the Epistles and the unimaginable miracle revealed to us in the words of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Commandments are easy to break, that is, until we open the door of our hearts to the miracle that the God of the Universe "bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness." Jesus died a horrific death to free us from the power of sin, He provided the Way for us to live righteously, and even now (after giving everything He had to give) He loves us so perfectly and respects our freedom so completely that He stands patiently waiting at the door of our hearts asking for our permission to enter in. That is the love of God for man. Let that truth soak in today and by His grace may each of us respond by presenting ourselves as "a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God."