

Easter 6
May 17, 2009
Fr. Bill McGinty

“Love One Another”

Today’s readings speak of the power of love and the effect that it has on peoples lives. The writers want to tell us that when Christ and his teaching enter our life, love becomes a prevailing force that brings change.

It is a theme that fits so well with a Sunday in which we have a Baptism at the 10 o’clock service. Harley Kathleen Evanchik, came into the word on December 17 and has already brought so much love with her. Today as she receives the sacrament of baptism she becomes a child of God and a special gift to her family.

A church and a church community is a special place that should reflect and communicate the love that Jesus brought, taught and demonstrated in his life.

Unfortunately, we use the same word for church, meaning a building for worship, as we do for church meaning the people of God, or our religious family. In the first century of Christianity they had no church buildings and the word they had for themselves was **ekki/esia**, a Greek word that means a gathering or a coming together.

So when the early Christians spoke about church they meant: “that group of people who they gather with and who they love.”

These gatherings took place in different places, but largely in individual homes. If the service had a time where the Lord’s Supper was repeated and bread and wine were shared, then the Christians called that service an Agape. Agape in Greek means a celebration of love. It is not the love of husband and wife, it is the love that Jesus taught, that deep caring of other human beings that brings out human kindness, understanding and often sacrifice.

A second century document speaks of the Christian Community in Derbe in Asia Minor. Derbe was one of the famous seven churches of Asia Minor first converted by Paul on his first missionary journey.

“When darkness fell we assembled at the house of Thaddeus because it was outside the town and sheltered under the mountain. All gathered together under the one roof, but not the children.

There were some who could still remember their parents speak of the Apostles and other Holy men. We greeted each other with peace and the leader marked each with the cross of Christ upon the forehead saying: “May Christ in whom you have been washed by the waters of Baptism confirm you in faith with every heavenly blessing.”

We sat, grouped tightly together by the light of the lamp and the fire. He reminded us of the words of faith that had been handed down to us, beseeching us to repeat that creed each day as a prayer to our father in heaven. “Teach these words to your children he said for by these words they can live in faith and attempt to follow the teaching of the water.”

Everyone listened attentively, hoping to remember his words and take them back to their family. “When I was young,” the leader said, “I heard from others lips that the words and deeds of Jesus the Lord had been written down for all to read as a testimony.” How I have longed over some forty long years to hold that Holy Book and read for myself of Jesus and all that he did. Alas, the honor has not fallen to me. Nor have I ever met anyone who has seen those sacred texts. All I can do and beseech you to do is that you re-tell the stories as your fathers taught you. Make them a living testament by daily practicing those lessons and virtues Jesus, spoke of. Most of all I plead with you to be gentle with one another. Let not harsh words fall from your lips but let the actions of each day be as if tomorrow the Lord returns and you will go with him home to the Kingdom of our father.

I beg you brothers and sisters to forgive even the hardest sinner in your midst with the kind forgiveness of a mother to her child. Remember the words of Jesus and know that not all are wise or clever, but like children must be guided in truth. Let love be your guide, **stick in everything**.

With that Dibia, a deacon stood up and read a letter from the church in Antioch, so far, far away. It had taken many months to reach us and others among the churches had added to it on its journey. It spoke of trials and hardships but also of converts and baptisms, weddings and the death of elders and those who passed to the Kingdom of Christ.

All listened and gasped at the news with quiet prayer and praise. When it was over, all were prayed for, as is our custom.

Then the leader took bread and broke it and shared it with us as it passed from hand to hand and hand to mouth. Many cried remembering the Lords words, at the sight of the Holy Blood. They wept to remember his cruel death and embraced each other with great tenderness.

Before leaving each gave, for it to be shared among the poorest according to the means, some flour or vegetable, wood or bread. The leader hugged each, blessing them and sending them forth with the words:

“Believe what you heard
Preach what you believe
Practice what you preach.”

We departed filled with the love of the Spirit that in our rising and sleeping we might live for the Lord and our lives be a living testimony of his holy and sacred life.

Eighteen hundred years later we too are taught by the life of Christ to live our lives as a living testimony to Jesus and all that he stood for.

The Gospel of John today highlights what many call the Great Commandment; it is the command to love. Jesus tells us in this Gospel: “You did not choose me, but I chose you. Love one another as I have loved you.”

“Loving one another when it comes to the poor, the destitute, the lost and even the sinner is easy. It is loving the person in the pew next to you that is hard. Loving the person in the next office may be difficult, but at the end of the day, we go home.

“We choose our friends,” the old saying goes, “But not our family.” Yet we are still commanded by Jesus to love. It is the hardest thing. Down the centuries it has proved to be the hardest thing. How do you love the unlovable, when every word and action of theirs would make you go to the opposite extreme? What price is too great and asking too much, even of the Christian? Who is it that does not deserve Agape today, tomorrow or ever? Each of us can name names on the finger of our left hand.

We can name names till Christ’s voice reminds us once again: “I have paid the price. I have taken on your pain. I have suffered the insult and felt the pain. Now you do the same and despite all love as I would love. Do this and you are my disciple.”

Do this and you are my disciple. Do it. Be a disciple.

Amen+