

“Living in Love”

Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost

Romans 12:9-21

“Love one another with brotherly affection . . .” Romans 12:10

New parents have many adjustments to make, as I am figuring out. New parents have to get used to having less flexibility in their schedules. They have to get used to asking permission from the other spouse to go out of the house, even for a few minutes. They have to get used to far less sleep than they enjoyed before. In summary, as I have heard many of you say to me before, new parents have to come to terms with the fact that absolutely everything in your life changes. How true!

Perhaps the greatest adjustment that new parents have to make is learning to live for their child or children. In my experience, husbands and wives receive some opportunities to live for another human being when the husband or wife takes his or her responsibility and commitment seriously after saying, “I do,” in holy matrimony. It is different, though, with the birth of a child. Now there is a child that has incredible need. A child who cannot do anything for himself or herself. A child who is utterly dependent on mom and dad. A child who is quite literally *a genetic reflection* of his or her parents. A child who will more than likely *grow to imitate many of the habits and mannerisms* learned from mom and dad.

I bring up this truth about parents living for their children and children being a reflection of their parents because it helps us better understand the connection between the Gospel reading and the Epistle reading that I want to bring together and preach on in our sermon this morning. To put it simply, in our Gospel reading Jesus presents us with the “big cross” and the “little cross.” Jesus foretells his death and his resurrection—He tells of the events that he must perform in Jerusalem and the suffering that he must endure in order to take our fallenness, our brokenness, our unrighteousness, our sinfulness—and the full consequences and all the punishment that goes with it—upon himself. Then he presents us with the reflection of that big cross through the little crosses that he calls his followers to bear as faithful Christians. The big cross and the little cross. Like a child and a parent, the one is meant to be a reflection of the other. *The one great, once-for-all-sacrifice and the unconditional love conveyed is meant to be reflected in the living sacrifices and lives of Christ-like love lived by Christian disciples.*

To illustrate Jesus’ idea of the “big cross” and the “little cross” further we can turn to some other words of Jesus and an image that he uses to describe the Christian life. It is an image with which Southern Californians especially are familiar. The image of a vine and its branches (**Show grape vine**).

By itself the vine has nothing to latch onto. By itself the branch is pretty useless. No clear purpose. It looks dead. Put the vine and the branches together and they do some real good. They produce fruit. They produce fruit that can be eaten as a delicious snack. They produce fruit that can be harvested for grape juice or delicious wine.

Jesus takes the two otherwise individual objects of a vine and a branch and puts them together in John 15 to illustrate a great truth about the Christian life. He uses branches connected to a vine as an

analogy. He describes himself as the vine. He describes the Heavenly Father as the vinedresser. He describes you and me as the branches. He says, "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing" John 15:4-5).

The Apostle Paul reminds us that in the waters of Holy Baptism the cross is put on us. He says, "We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4). The big cross and the little cross. The vine of Christ being connected to the branch of the human life and producing the fruit of Christ and his love. When Jesus and his cross enter into my life, I am crucified and resurrected with Christ as a baptized believer. I am now connected to the vine as a new, transformed branch.

When a faithful disciple carries his little cross of faithfulness to Jesus, unconditional, selfless, sacrificial love, that disciple reflects the big cross of Christ and his sacrifice. His unconditional, selfless, sacrificial love for the world. Like a branch to a vine, the two are coupled together and bear much fruit.

So what is the fruit that we bear when we carry the cross of Jesus faithfully as his disciples? The Apostle Paul gives us this picture in our lesson to the Romans. In general, it looks like a life of sacrificial love. Specifically, it looks like a faithful follower of Christ abhorring what is evil and opposed to all that dishonors God and his name. A follower of Christ who bears the cross of Christ faithfully and bears the fruit of Christ's love fights hard not to follow another. He fights hard not to listen to the voice of the culture concerning what is right and wrong in every area of life, perhaps most relevant to our time, the areas of morality and human sexuality. A follower of Christ bears the fruit of Christ in Christian love by living in harmony with all people and putting the best construction on all things. A much needed reminder in light of recent events and the inhumane behavior taking place in Ferguson, MO and other places in the world like the border of Israel-Gaza and the towns and streets of Iraq. A follower of Christ who bears the fruit of Christian love is deeply concerned about the needs of others and seeks to give generously and cheerfully to meet those needs. She is concerned about those who need a right relationship with their God and seeks to give of her abundance of time, talents, and treasures to help the local Church meet that need. He is concerned about his fellow brothers and sisters in Christ who are struggling with the basic necessities of life. He seeks to find ways to *anonymously* meet those needs.

One who reflects the big cross by carrying his little cross and is connected to the vine of Christ as a righteous branch bears the fruit of Christ in other ways as well. Outdoing one another in showing honor. Being constant in prayer. Blessing those who persecute you. Rejoicing with those who rejoice and weeping with those who weep. Not being conceited or haughty but associating with the lowly and humble. Simply living peaceably with all with the peace of Christ guarding your heart and mind. This is the picture Paul paints for us. A picture of a truly fruitful life of Christ-like, sacrificial love towards others.

It is my prayer that the cross of Christ continues to be joined to our lives more and more as we seek to truly live lives "in Christ." Through continual participation in the grace of God delivered in the Word and the Sacraments, we can abide in Christ. Abiding in Christ in this way, we remain in the vine as faithful branches. Oh what fruit of sacrificial love the Spirit can produce in us for the good of others and the advancement of his kingdom. Amen.