

Reflection for September 6, 2020

Romans 13:8-12; John 15:5-12

“Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.”

Romans 13:8

The apostle Paul often gets a bad rap – there are many things he has written which have been disputed, and challenged, and downright rejected. But today’s passage from Romans is one which speaks well to our Christian calling – because it reminds us of what’s important and does so in such a way that it’s easy to remember – essentially in one word – LOVE.

To some, it may sound trite ... because the word ‘love’ gets tossed around a lot these days ... we love everything from our car to our pets to a certain kind of latte. But the love which Paul speaks about is so much deeper than that. It is love rooted in God’s love and God’s desire for us.

Do you want to fulfill the commandments? - Love.
Do you want to be faithful, keep from hatred and murder, refrain from taking what isn’t yours, refrain from wanting what isn’t yours? – Love.

2.

Of course, love isn’t always easy, or there would be a lot more of it. As we struggle to define what is or isn’t right- in our world, our families, our church, our country – everything must be put to one test: does it exhibit love? If the answer is yes, you can’t go wrong.

Stay out of debt, Paul says. Oh, except you owe one thing, and you owe it to everyone. LOVE. It’s the only debt we owe.

A story is told about John the evangelist, author of the gospel of John, who preached at Ephesus into his nineties. Tradition has it that he died there in about the year 100 CE.

At that age, the story goes, John was so feeble that he had to be carried into the church on a stretcher. When he no longer had the stamina to preach a normal sermon, it’s said that he would lean up on one elbow, and say only: “Little children, love one another.” People would then carry him back out of the church.

This continued for weeks ... and every week he repeated his one-sentence sermon: “Little children, love one another.”

Weary of the repetition, the congregation finally asked, "Master, why do you always say this?"

3.

"Because," John replied, "it is the Lord's command, and if this only is done, it is enough."

Isn't that essentially what Jesus is saying to his disciples in today's gospel? If you keep my commands you will remain in my love ... and my joy will be in you and your joy will be complete.

It's been said that if we could just grasp the depth and breadth of God's unconditional love for us, life would be radically a journey of joy.

Now that's not saying that life would be all sunshine and roses ... all happiness and laughter. The joy talked about here is different from mere happiness. It is a joy that can be present even in the midst of hardship.

When Jesus speaks these words, he is drawing ever closer to his passion and crucifixion. He has spoken about his death many times to his disciples ... he has foretold his betrayal and Peter's denial. And yet, Jesus' joy is profound and deep, even as he faces death. It is the joy of being loved by the Father. And our joy, too, must spring from a deep awareness that we are massively loved by God.

4.

There are times when we seem to understand what this gift of love is; sometimes we readily experience that love flowing in and through us, giving us joy in loving others. Like a kind of energy which is not of our own making.

I can think of a few people I've known who just constantly seemed to radiate contentment ... like they were truly abiding in God's love, and feeling joy from it.

You see, the deepest joys and satisfactions of life have to do with our experience of loving and being loved.

Think of the love between a parent and a child, or the love of a partner or life-long friend that is strong and lasts forever.

Jesus says love enables us to die for others; love spends itself for another. And only love lasts, as a motive, for any good we want to do. Jesus knew that, and linked love and joy.

His way, the Jesus way, is one of fullest human love and fulfillment. His command to love one another is not just to be obeyed out of duty, it is our path to true joy in life. God's love, made known in Jesus, is the love that is welcoming, accepting and forgiving of others. It is the love that binds us together as God's

5.

children and Jesus' followers. It is love made evident, through the way Jesus lived.

And it is in those times, when we come up against that kind of love, or when we feel it bubbling up in ourselves, that we discover the meaning of true joy – joy that makes our life complete ... even in the midst of heartache and sorrow, of trouble and uncertainty.

With that in mind, this morning I want to share the story, *A Sandpiper to Bring you Joy* ... which some of you will no doubt know. It's a true story, as told by Ruth Peterson.

She was six years old when I first met her on the beach near where I live. I drive to this beach, a distance of three or four miles, whenever the world begins to close in on me. She was building a sand castle or something and looked up, her eyes as blue as the sea.

"Hello," she said.

I answered with a nod, not really in the mood to bother with a small child.

"I'm building," she said.

"I see that. What is it?" I asked, not caring.

"Oh, I don't know, I just like the feel of sand."

That sounds good, I thought, and slipped off my shoes. A sandpiper glided by.

6.

"That's a joy," the child said.

"It's a what?"

"It's a joy. My mama says sandpipers come to bring us joy." The bird went gliding down the beach.

"Good-bye joy," I muttered to myself, "hello pain," and turned to walk on. I was depressed; my life seemed completely out of balance.

"What's your name?" She wouldn't give up.

"Ruth," I answered. "I'm Ruth Peterson."

"Mine's Wendy... I'm six."

"Hi, Wendy."

She giggled. "You're funny," she said. In spite of my gloom I laughed too and walked on. Her musical giggle followed me. "Come again, Mrs. P," she called. "We'll have another happy day."

The days and weeks that followed belonged to others: a group of unruly Boy Scouts, PTA meetings, and my ailing mother.

The sun was shining one morning as I took my hands out of the dishwasher. "I need a sandpiper," I said to myself, gathering up my coat.

The ever-changing balm of the seashore awaited me. The breeze was chilly, but I strode along, trying to recapture the serenity needed. I had forgotten the child, and was startled when she appeared.

7.

"Hello, Mrs.. P," she said. "Do you want to play?"
"What did you have in mind?" I asked, with a twinge of annoyance.
"I don't know, you say."
"How about charades?" I asked sarcastically.
The tinkling laughter burst forth again. "I don't know what that is."
"Then let's just walk." Looking at her, I noticed the delicate fairness of her face.
"Where do you live?" I asked.
"Over there." She pointed toward a row of summer cottages.
Strange, I thought, in winter. "Where do you go to school?"
"I don't go to school. Mommy says we're on vacation." She chattered little girl talk as we strolled up the beach, but my mind was on other things.
When I left for home, Wendy said it had been a happy day.
Feeling surprisingly better, I smiled at her and agreed.
Three weeks later, I rushed to my beach in a state of near panic. I was in no mood to even greet Wendy. I thought I saw her mother on the porch and felt like demanding she keep her child at home.

8.

"Look, if you don't mind," I said crossly when Wendy caught up with me, "I'd rather be alone today."
She seemed unusually pale and out of breath. "Why?" she asked.
I turned to her and shouted, "Because my mother died!" and then I thought, my God, why was I saying this to a little child?
"Oh," she said quietly, "then this is a bad day."
"Yes," I said, "and yesterday and the day before and-oh, go away!"
"Did it hurt?" she inquired.
"Did what hurt?" I was exasperated with her, with myself.
"When she died?"
"Of course it hurt!!!!" I snapped, misunderstanding, wrapped up in myself. I strode off.

A month or so after that, when I next went to the beach, she wasn't there.
Feeling guilty, ashamed and admitting to myself that I missed her, I went up to the cottage after my walk and knocked at the door. A drawn looking young woman with honey-colored hair opened the door. "Hello," I said. "I'm Ruth Peterson. I missed your little girl today and wondered where she was."

9.

"Oh yes, Mrs. Peterson, please come in. Wendy spoke of you so much. I'm afraid I allowed her to bother you. If she was a nuisance, please, accept my apologies."

"Not at all--she's a delightful child," I said, suddenly realizing that I meant it. "Where is she?"

"Wendy died last week, Mrs. Peterson. She had leukemia. Maybe she didn't tell you."

Struck dumb, I groped for a chair. My breath caught.

"She loved this beach; so when she asked to come, we couldn't say no.

She seemed so much better here and had a lot of what she called happy days. But the last few weeks, she declined rapidly..." her voice faltered.

"She left something for you ... if only I can find it. Could you wait a moment while I look?"

I nodded stupidly, my mind racing for something, anything, to say to this lovely young woman. She handed me a smeared envelope, with Mrs. P printed in bold, childish letters.

Inside was a drawing in bright crayon hues--a yellow beach, a blue sea, and a brown bird. Underneath was carefully printed: A SANDPIPER TO BRING YOU JOY.

10.

Tears welled up in my eyes, and a heart that had almost forgotten to love opened wide. I took Wendy's mother in my arms. "I'm so sorry, so sorry," I muttered over and over, and we wept together.

The precious little picture is framed now and hangs in my study. Six words---one for each year of her life---that speak to me of harmony, courage, undemanding love. A gift from a child with sea-blue eyes and hair the color of sand---who taught me the gift of love.

Perhaps this story reminds us all that we need to take time to enjoy living and life and each other. And that in truly loving, we find deepest joy.

Life is so complicated, and the hustle and bustle of everyday traumas, can make us lose focus about what is truly important or what is only a momentary setback or crisis. May we always have a sense of the deep love with which God holds us; may we keep our hearts open to discovering that love in what might be surprising ways and places, and through people we might never expect; and may we be always ready to share that love with others ... so that we, and they, may experience more moments of true joy.