



January 30, 2022

Fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Love never fails.—1 Corinthians 13:8

Dear Friends;

I don't recall the details but someone placed an anti-vaccination meme or diatribe on the family thread. It hit me the wrong way. I had just done the funeral for a baby that had died in utero. The parents knew something was wrong but couldn't get any of the local hospitals to give them attention. They had to drive to south Sacramento. At the time the emergency rooms and ICU's in our area were overflowing with critically ill Covid patients the majority of who had not been vaccinated. I had seen the fully occupied Intensive Care Units.

Normally I would ignore the anti-vaccine rant. Or mildly say "no politics." But instead I said, "I think that if someone chooses not to get vaccinated they should also choose not to go to the hospital when they are dying of Covid." One of my sisters who refused to get vaccinated responded. She said that instead of condemning the unvaccinated I should be praying for them. At that moment it struck me how my statement must have sounded to her. She had gotten very ill from Covid and her husband who also was unvaccinated ended up in the hospital where he almost died of kidney failure. I said I was sorry and I do pray for the unvaccinated, but I was frustrated from what I had experienced. We're Okay.

There are no shortages of issues on which we can disagree. Social media has only magnified our differences and polarizations (a good reason not to be on social media) we often isolate in echo chambers of like-minded individuals who reinforce our opinions, beliefs and preferences. We then condemn the other and act towards anyone with a differing opinion with hostility. We divide our families, communities and the body politic into mutually opposing forces.

St Paul had to deal with a similar divisive situation within the Christian community in Corinth. It is important to remember that his letter is addressed to the whole community not to individuals. Paul is trying to encourage the responsibility of each member to the common good. Last week he used an analogy of the body to describe the community. Just as one part of the body cannot say to the other parts "I do not need you" so too individual members of the body of Christ cannot say they do not need the others. That unity is essential and is why at the Last Supper Jesus will pray that "*all may be one.*"

Love is the virtue that makes our unity possible. Greek has several words for different types of Love. The Greek word Paul is using is *Agape*. This is Divine love. Our ability to love divinely comes not from our own innate abilities. It comes from the realization that we are completely loved and shaped by the gift of God. God loves us as we are with all our flaws and imperfections. This love is not earned but is gift. This gift is always directed toward the other. Once aware of what God did and continues to do for us, humans have no other choice but to love others. This is especially true if we have difficulties and differences with them.

Often our contentious issues come from a place of hurt. Love invites us to accompany each other in our hurts rather than be indifferent to them. Paul reminds us that there are three things that are powerful and lasting: faith, hope and love. These are divine characteristics. Faith is loyalty, sticking with another no matter what. Hope is trust. We place all our eggs in the other's basket. Love (*Agape*) is group cohesion. This is an absolute commitment to the unity, cohesion and integrity of the whole community. Love is the greatest of these.

In our Gospel passage from Luke, the preaching of Jesus infuriates his fellow villagers and they want to kill him. But Jesus lovingly passes through their midst and went away. Paul's inspiring reflections on love were born out of painful experiences with fellow believers in Corinth. The Sign of Peace in the Liturgy reminds us not to lose sight of the real experiences that are challenges to love. Love never fails!

Peace!

Fr Ron

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