**While we are away … reflections for the Pentecost season**

**August 30, 2020 – 13th Sunday after Pentecost**

*We continue in the ‘green’ season of Pentecost, following Jesus and his ministry as we think about the Spirit-led ministry of the Church. Here is Pastor Steve’s message for the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost. Remember that next* ***Sunday, September 6****, we are planning for an* ***outside service*** *on our parking lot (“Praise Lot”) at 9:30 am. Think good weather thoughts!*

**Lessons for Pentecost 13**

*Psalm 26:1-8; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28*

*[NOTE: Many people who hear this message will do so by watching the tape of the service. Pastor Steve films a brief video introduction for each Sunday that is seen before the start of the worship. This week, Pastor Steve was in Philadelphia filming the LOVE statue connecting with Paul’s words to the church “Let love be genuine.” As he filmed in Center City an ambulance went by. You can hear the siren as the video begins. This siren event gave Pastor Steve another idea for his message about love.]*

*“Let love be genuine.”* These words from Paul were the driver for my message this week. Today, we have our second consecutive passage from chapter 12 of Paul’s letter to the Romans. This letter is deemed to be Paul at his theological best – he takes us into prolonged discussions about God’s saving work starting with the call of Abraham, the law given to Moses. But, Paul, trained in Judaism, contends that the law was not the end of God’s work to bring us into a relationship with God. “No”, says Paul, “God’s ultimate saving work was accomplished through Jesus and his death on the Cross for us.” Obeying the law will not save us – having faith that we are saved by Jesus will. Paul concludes:

*We hold a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.*

This is Paul’s contention and it takes him 11 chapters of Romans to make his point. In chapters 9 thru 11, Paul expresses his heartfelt concern for his people, the Jewish people, God’s ‘chosen people’, for whom the law and obedience to the law were central. Paul notes that many are still clinging to the law and not to Jesus. He understands, though, that God has called them and God will work this out. In trust, he says, “the calling of God is irrevocable”. He finally comes to this conclusion about God: *How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways.*

Paul moves from the unsearchable, inscrutable to chapter 12, where he makes a concrete appeal to this congregation of Christians, who have never met him, to live in certain ways, to model certain behaviors. *Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed*. After 11 heavy, theologically laden chapters, Paul gets practical. Yes, it is heady, heavy stuff – this incredible divine grace of God, but this grace touches our human lives, and makes a difference in our day-to-day living.

*“Let love be genuine.”* This opening line from today’s lesson did, indeed, drive my thoughts for today’s message. When I thought of an image for this week’s message reflecting on Paul’s words – it was a no brainer – get a picture of the iconic LOVE statue. Paul’s words drove me, so I (with my navigator, Jean) literally drove to Philadelphia to make a video of the City of Brotherly Love’s famous LOVE Statue. Driven by Paul’s words, we drove off in the early morning to John F. Kennedy Plaza across from City Hall under the watchful eye of Billy Penn. There was no music from the car radio that morning, if there had been it would have been the Beatles singing, “All you need is love.”

Something striking happened, though, as I got out of my car on the almost empty city streets and started filming … an ambulance went by. An ambulance with its loud siren drove past the Plaza. The siren was loud, even if there were hardly any people, any other drivers to hear it. I heard it as I made the video and so did Jean (stationed inside our car in case she had to move out of the no parking area). When I got back to the car, she said, “you better take a look at that – the siren was really loud, you might not be heard.” So, I quickly replayed the clip. She was right. You could definitely hear the ambulance siren. I thought about making a retake when I was prompted – by the Spirit? – and decided not to redo the tape. The siren should stay in the video.

I hope you all heard the siren at the beginning of the worship video today.

There is a warning for us to hear. A warning of an emergency. A warning that we need to take seriously and hear with urgency.  The Spirit ‘told’ me that the warning was contained in Paul’s words that began, “*Let love be genuine.* So, let me read again these words of Paul, that get very concrete about what ***genuine love*** might look like:

*- Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good;*

*- Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.*

*- Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.*

*- Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.*

*- Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.*

*- Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.*

*- Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.*

*- Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly;*

*- Do not claim to be wiser than you are.*

*- Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.*

*- If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.*

*- Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God;*

*- No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them;*

*- If they are thirsty, give them something to drink;*

*- Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

 In these past two weeks, our two major parties and their candidates have given us their party platforms. There are differences - to be sure! There are different ways different people hear the candidates and platforms; there are  different ways people respond to the candidates and platforms as they set forth policies they will strive to implement. We know how divided we are right now as a country. In the past several days, we have witnessed yet another police shooting which adds to the desperate search for racial justice. What we see happening on our streets and i9n our communities leaves us frustrated and distraught. We can and we will discuss, argue over, fight about what needs to take place in our society, this year and in years to come

 As we engage is such debating, as we hear the candidates, as we hear the voices for justice, may we also hear Paul’s siren, Paul’s warning siren, Paul’s love siren, calling us to hear – above all the noises of this world, all the competing words of party - the transforming call of God’s grace. Paul says this is urgent, living in this world with love values will transform us and empower us to transform our world.

 What if we were to read these words of Paul everyday for the next 65 days? I have already printed them out – they will be on our refrigerator and by my bedside. What if we were to consider the policies being proposed and debated in light of Paul’s love list? What if we were to heed the voices that have been so often ignored with Paul’s words in mind? What if we were to take one item on the list and let that be our thought for the day, perhaps our transforming thought for the day? How might that affect our actions? Our words? *Extend hospitality to strangers, weep with those who weep, live peaceably with all, overcome evil with good.* Let’s give it a try.

 When I read Paul’s list, I can think of examples, positive examples of actions reflecting these virtues. In the aftermath of the shooting in the back of Jacob Blake by a Kenosha police officer, his mother, Julia Jackson, had a chance to address the public. This came after two nights of unrest and protest. She calmly called for prayer. She said if her son, Jacob, knew what was taking place, he would be “very unpleased” at all the violence in the aftermath of the violence that leaves him paralyzed. She said, ‘we’ need healing, speaking not just of her family, but of this country. She urged all of us: *“Let’s use our hearts and our love and our intelligence to work together to show the rest of the world how humans are supposed to treat each other.”* Amen, sister Jackson!

 *Let love be genuine.* Who knows whether Paul was a singer or not? Today his words from Romans sing out an urgent song, recalling a song of Hal David and Burt Bacharach, sung by Dionne Warwick in the 60’s: “What the world needs now is love, sweet love, that’s the only thing that there is just too little of.”

 It is really not a new song or a new idea. The world needs love – people need to be loved, people need to experience love, people need to share love, people need to act with love. Love is transforming. God knows this. God showed this in the transforming act of love – God’s only Son dying on the Cross for us. Jesus died for us, because we could not live up to God’s standards of loving God and loving neighbor. So, Jesus came ***to us***, and ***for us***; Jesus gave his life ***for us*** and still comes ***to us*** through the Spirit to give life, transformed life. In the Gospel, Jesus calls us to his love, to his self-denying love shown on the Cross. In Jesus, God let love be genuine – divinely and humanly genuine.

 May we be driven by this genuine love of God. May God continue to drive us to let our love be genuine. Amen.