



# ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

## The Fifth Sunday After The Epiphany

*Being the Sunday, February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2014*

### ✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠

Today's lesson from St. Paul's Epistle to the Colossian Church is another of his meditations on the centrality of the love for mankind to the Christian faith. Indeed it serves as a companion to Paul's meditation on the necessity of charity in the 13<sup>th</sup> Chapter of his First Epistle to the Corinthians.

The 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of First Corinthians not simply an utterly sublime distillation of the essence of Christ's Gospel; In its King James translation, the passage ranks as perhaps the most glorious example of English prose ever penned. Indeed, it is so elegantly constructed – and the sentiments it expresses so appealing – that people often fail to appreciate that its message is quite terrifying. How else can one explain the fact that – even in its most lumpish modern translation – it is one of the most popular readings at weddings?

The Greeks had a bunch of words describing the different types of love, and there is nothing of the erotic in the word Paul uses in the two epistles. The love Paul is commending is a love of mankind in general: *agape* in Greek; *caritas* in Latin; *charity* in English. If we do not have this love of mankind in our hearts, says Paul, all the other virtues we think of as essentially Christian are quite pointless.

Whenever I read or listen to these passages of scripture I am reminded of a woman who called into a local radio talk show a few years ago to bemoan the barbarous state of the nation. All would be right with American society, she

proclaimed, if only people would love each other a bit more.

It's hard to quarrel with that. Clearly, if drug dealers loved addicts a bit more they wouldn't enslave them with narcotics. If muggers loved their victims a bit more they wouldn't rob and maim and kill them. If rioters loved their neighbors a bit more they wouldn't burn their homes and pillage their property. And so *ad infinitum*.

There is, however, nothing particularly profound about this thought. It doesn't take the brain of a rocket scientist to work out that just loving each other a bit more is the solution to almost all of society's ills – at least those that aren't occasioned by accident or infirmity.

But the problem is not identifying the problem. If that's all there is to it, the Flower Children would have solved everything back in the 1960s. That's what their "love-ins" and "give peace a chance" songs were all about.

The trouble is that while we know things would be very much better if we all **did** love people a bit more, the sad fact of the matter is that we **don't** love each other even the tiniest bit more. Truth to tell, these days it seems that we love each other an awful lot less.

Nor should we find this entirely surprising. There is, you see, absolutely nothing natural about people loving other people in a generic

sense. It is far more natural for us to be highly suspicious of each other. Indeed, not to put too fine a point on it, it is very much more natural for us to hate one another than to love one another.

Consider: It is highly probable that we love our parents, our spouses and our children. It is also probable that we feel some degree of affection towards most of our relations and most people in our immediate social circle. But as for the wider world, most of the people in it are definitely suspect – and, what's more, the depth of our suspicion increases in direct proportion to the distance, literally but also socially, they are from us.

Where, then, does this notion that we should all love one another come from? The answer should be obvious to folks who go to church. Christians don't have much choice in the matter. Jesus commands us to love one another. Indeed, he doesn't give us an option in the matter. Consult Jesus' Summary of the Law.

You'll find it spelled out St. Matthew's Gospel in Cha 22, Vv 37-40 and Chap 10 of St. Luke's Gospel, Vv 25-28: "Hear O Israel. The Lord our God is one Lord. And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind and with all thy strength. This is the first commandment. And the second is like; namely this: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself, on these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

The fact that Jesus commanded us to love our neighbors is a sure indication that loving people outside our immediate circle of family and friends does not come naturally or easily. If it came naturally he wouldn't have bothered to mention it. If it came easily, he wouldn't have made such a big deal about it.

And the 13<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Paul's First Epistle to the Christians of Corinth – not necessarily the Roman Empire's most loving people – describes in glorious Technicolor just how big a deal it is; just how difficult it is to foster in our hearts; and just how essential it is for Christians to strive to cultivate it.

Indeed, Paul tells us that unless we strive cultivate within us this great altruistic lack for mankind, none of all our virtues will be worth anything – which defines the issue as far as Christians are concerned. My talk show caller, however, was most definitely not a Christian. Indeed, she spoke disparagingly of Christians as she was making her point.

It is something of a paradox that so many non-Christians subscribe to the idea that it is a natural facet of the human condition for people to love one another. How could they possibly have gotten such a bizarre idea? After all, there is nothing in the Theory of Evolution that should lead them to believe that it to be the case.

The idea that it is natural for everybody – except Christians apparently -- to love altruistically everybody else doesn't square terribly well with the concept of the survival of the fittest. The notion of folks trampling other folks into the ground to gain some slight advantage is more in keeping with orthodox evolutionary theory.

Nor, for that matter, does the concept of altruistic love as a natural phenomenon of humanity square with fashionable thinking on the subject of ethics. It is utterly illogical for people who subscribe to the idea that there are no such things as moral absolutes and who practice "situation ethics" [ethics that change according to the situation] to practice the sort of altruistic love the radio caller was advocating.

Altruistic love for humanity (charity) is not an abstract concept – or at least it cannot be if the intention is that it should transform us into kinder, gentler people. This sort of transforming love manifests itself in the way you *treat* people, not in the way you *think* about them. Indeed, as Jesus pointed out: "By their deeds ye shall know them."

Logic dictates that in a society in which ethics change according to the situation, the practitioners will put their own interests way ahead of others. And the intrinsic selfishness this sort of behavior engenders is the antithesis of the altruistic love the radio caller so desperately yearns for. *AMEN.*