

The 14th Sunday after Pentecost

Sunday, August 29, 2010

Mutual Love

Texts: Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

The author of Hebrews gives his first readers and us some very practical advice in today's second lesson. The original audience was not like us in many ways. The book is a letter but it is really a sermon within a letter in many ways. It focuses on many issues that the early Christians faced but it is obvious that its original audience was a group of persecuted Christians. We are definitely not persecuted. But the advice in Chapter 13 is also relevant to us. Our church is facing a stressful time. Anytime there is a change in leadership and especially when it catches us off guard, a group faces stress. Likewise the audience listening to Hebrews was stressed. Their stress was from outside of the group because they feared arrest and already faced persecution and the plundering of their goods (see Hebrews 10:32-34) and even possible death. All groups of people when faced with stress have difficulty continuing as they used to. Congregations, like families, are very close to one another and the stressors of life affect them deeply. The original hearers of Hebrews are struggling just as we are struggling. The advice in Hebrews is good for any Christian group but especially any under extra stress.

Our second lesson begins with "let mutual love continue." This is literally, remain or continue in brotherly love. The Greek word used is *philadelphia*... you know that same as the city named for brotherly love. After this statement are some practical ways to remain in brotherly or mutual love. But what does this love look like?

Well think about a family. No family is perfect but some seem to weather storms better than others and the ones who seem to be healthiest are also the ones who show constant love for one another. This does not mean that they agree on everything. This does not mean that they get together every day for dinner. This does not mean that they have never experienced hard times. It does mean that they have respect for each other. It does mean that they put the family before their own needs and desires. It does mean that every member is valued. It does mean that one person does not dominate and control the other members. It means that family members are interdependent but are not completely independent of each other; likewise adult members are never totally dependent on each other.

Families who can show mutual or brotherly love to all of the members are better equipped to deal with stressors. Hebrews has some very specific ways of talking about brotherly love. We are to welcome the stranger. Just as families should not shut themselves off to the outside world, as a church, we need to show hospitality to the stranger. The first hearers of this letter actually often hosted men and women who were coming to preach and teach the gospel. Today, we are reminded that those in our midst may be angels, messengers from God. But they also may simply be neighbors in need of hearing and experiencing the gospel. The hearers of Hebrews are reminded to remember those in prison – especially those imprisoned for their faith. We ought to keep doing so but I believe it is also a broader reminder to remember all those in need around us. Especially to remember to visit those in our area who are not able to get out of their homes or who are sick and suffering. Upholding the rite of marriage is always good advice to a community. I have no idea what the divorce rate was when this letter was written, but I know more than ever as a community of faith, we need to help

each other maintain our marriages! The love of money can certainly do much damage to a community and individuals. Showing brotherly love to each other means helping to remind one another of the blessings we have and that all good gifts from God who provides all we need for daily life.

These are all ways to continue in mutual love. Let us work to do so in our personal lives and in this congregation as we move forward. Let us not forget that mutual love begins within our doors but extends to the world beyond our doors as well. Let us take seriously our Lord's words about being a host in Luke's gospel. Let our mutual love not just be for those who can repay it by inviting us to the grand parties or repaying us in gifts, let our mutual love be for those who can never repay us as well. Give us the courage, O Lord, to invite the poor, the lame, the crippled, and blind to our tables, especially to your table for Holy Communion.

Most of all as we try to live in brotherly love toward one another, remind us that none of us deserves your love. Yet we are filled with your love and grace. May your love be the love that we extend to each other to live together as your people of faith!