

Epiphany 2 2018

I take as my text today, from St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans:

Let love be without dissimulation. Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good. Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another; not slothful in business; fervent in spirit; serving the Lord;

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.”

Some years ago, Betty and I were building a small cottage behind my mother's house, where we lived for about two and a half years.

Needless-to-say, it was quite an experience, and I learned a lot just watching and peering out the window to take in all the activity.

I noticed with interest how meticulous each member of the work-crew was in how they went about their tasks.

In particular, I was intrigued with the brick mason as he laid the foundation for the house, and proceeded to build the fireplace, and then the chimney, especially how he placed each brick with great care. Each day, when he had finished, he would brush off the speckles of mortar so the bricks looked clean and neat.

He told me one day that all too often people hurry through their jobs and don't take the time to do their best work. “People don't pay much attention to how it really looks,” he told me.

As I look back and think about it, isn't that an example of what St. Paul was getting at in his Epistle to the Romans?

When we stop to think about it, the building of a house relates so well to the building of the Church, and is quite illustrative of the thinking of St. Paul.

In the building of a house, many people with different talents and skills come together, working in unison, adding to what each accomplishes, until the finished product emerges.

The brick mason lays the foundation upon which the carpenter builds a structure; the roofers apply their skills, as do the cabinet makers, the electricians, the plumbers, and so forth.

And, when each person applies his skill with a sense of personal pride and love for what he is doing, the project comes alive.

So it is with the Church. Each member carries out his own function, regardless of how prominent or how humble it might be; each member contributing a task. It is when all of these come together that the Church functions as it ought.

If we follow through on Paul's thinking, we find that consistently he refers to the Church as a body, and we are its members, its arms and legs, hands and fingers, and as a body, we each have a role to play in the well-being and functioning of that body.

God has endowed us with different gifts, talents, abilities, that are needed by the Church, the Body of Christ. Our motive in presenting these gifts, and using them for the common good, must come from the conviction that it is our duty and privilege to offer them in service to our Heavenly Father, and to the glory of His Holy Church.

In the passage we read from Paul's Letter to the Church at Rome, he singles out certain gifts:

1. Prophecy, and by prophecy, we don't mean foretelling the future but rather, proclaiming the word of God;
2. Ministry, or perhaps better, "practical service" in showing every day the love of Christ in deeds of service to others;
3. Teaching, in that the Word of God, the message of Christ, needs to be explained;
4. Exhortation, not so much in a daunting sense, but more in spurring people on to the joy of life in Christ;
5. Giving, or perhaps "sharing," even more, it is simple kindness, not prying into a person's circumstances but delighting in the sheer joy of giving;
6. Ruling, or "leadership," taking on responsibility with an eagerness that comes from the heart;
7. Mercy, or forgiveness, more than that, it is forgiving another in a way that lifts him out of the mire; it is based on love, not on superiority.

As members of this one Body, we must not only work in unison, and with a sense of greater purpose, we must also work with unselfish zeal, and with love and respect for each other.

Paul calls upon us to exercise our lives in brotherly love. In this exercise of love, there is no room for hypocrisy, play-acting, or ulterior motives. Our lives must be guided by a sincere and pure outpouring of the heart.

We must be passionate, both in our distaste for evil, and in our respect for good, in the words of St. Paul: “Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good.”

We must be affectionate, one toward another, as we are members of one family in Christ. We have one father, God.

And while St. Paul says “Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep,” we may find it easier to weep with another, than to rejoice.

For in keeping with the tenor of his Epistle, if we are truly to rejoice with another, we must put aside self, put aside envy, put aside disappointment, and take as much joy in the success of others as in our own success.

The Church, the Body of Christ: in St. Paul’s Letter, we see, not only our functions as members of the Body of Christ; more than that, we see that this membership requires of us the spirit of love, of sympathy, and of regard for others, fulfilling our relationships one with another, and with our Creator and Heavenly Father.

As members of this Body of Christ, we find opportunities beyond imagination to fulfill our individual callings as God’s adopted children. We each have been blessed with gifts of God’s Grace, talents and abilities that are essential to maintaining its wellbeing, and by our participation in the life of this small Parish, we are contributing to its cohesiveness, its growth and development, and its contribution to the larger Body of Christ, the Church.

In the spirit of St. Paul’s Letter to the Church at Rome, in his words:

Let love be without dissimulation. Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good. Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another; not slothful in business; fervent in spirit; serving the Lord;

Image what we can accomplish as a Body, as a Parish, when we each dedicate our God-given talents and skills to the building of His Church.

Truly, it is when we give over our hearts to Jesus Christ, and allow Him to enter in, and to bring them under God's governance, that we can realize our individual callings as members of His Body. Indeed, in dedicating ourselves in His service, we come into that Peace which the world cannot give but comes freely through the Love and Grace of God.