

24th of February 2019  
Epiphany Seven  
St Matthew 6

Today, of course, is the last Sunday I will be with you, and as has happened so many Sundays in the past, the timing of this gospel passage is perfect.

I say that because my spiritual safari began back in junior high school when someone gave me a pocket sized New Testament with a zippered cover. About the same time I had my first after school, Saturday, and summer vacation job with the Olmsted County Historical Society in my hometown, and would read it when I got to the museum early, and during lunch.

We all have our favourite passages to which we return. Mine included the Sermon on the Mount and the last chapters of most of St Paul's letters. Those chapters and verses were his practical instructions for living the Christian life. They were simple, straight forward, and led directly to what Bishop Wilson Seely Lewis described as "practical, practicing Christianity" that makes a difference in lives and in the world.

I took to heart St Paul's warning against those ceaseless theological debates that go no where, such as when a bouquet of bishops or a congress of cardinals debated how many angels could dance on the head of a pin. Rather, what became important then, and remains so now, has been following the two great commandments taught by Jesus - love God with all your might, care for your neighbour and love them as you want to be loved.

A good place to begin, Jesus taught, was meeting the basic needs of others by sharing what we possess. If they are thirsty and you have water, share it. If they are hungry and you have food, cut the meat a bit thinner and water down the soup. Someone needs warm clothing, take a look at the inventory in your closet and do the right thing. Just basis sharing.

Over the past 29 years, that is what our parish family has done within the wider community. You have done it, you continue to do it, and may God constantly inspire you to keep on doing good.

In some ways, it seems my life is coming full circle, back to my first part time job, sitting on the back steps of the Historical Society, reading the Sermon on the Mount, and realizing that Jesus was talking about more than just the physical needs of others.

I arrived here on a Wednesday in Lent, tired out and worn after a long day on the road and then helping move things in to the rectory. Suddenly, Mary Ann Curtis came through the back door, insisting we had to come to the potluck dinner. She was not one to take 'no' for an answer. I was too tired to

remember much of the evening other than Dottie Berghuis, if only because she was wearing a Laura Ashley skirt, and a warm welcome. The best description is true Christian hospitality at its finest. All Saints' has never been merely a church, a congregation, a parish, and certainly more than a building. It is a family to everyone who comes through the door. We welcome, we constantly care and serve each other.

I want to tell you, that of all the people I have met and come to know and love here at All Saints' there is one person, outside of Pat, that is, with whom I have spent more time than anyone else, and who is an inspiration to us all. Here, every day, quietly working - not to make things perfect, but so that all of us can worship God in the beauty of holiness. Someone passionately devoted to this parish and parish family for well over seventy year. That is Cynthia Sorensen. We are all blessed and inspired by her dedication and without hesitation, I had, embodiment of holiness before God and all of us.

We might not have many family members who are going hungry or in need of clothing, but I saw how much that sense of family meant a few years ago - the Sunday morning when David and Linda VanderLaan lost their home in a fire. There was no doubt that we would rally around. But that morning during the coffee hour David and Linda came to church. They said everything about practical practicing Christianity when David said, "We wanted to be with our family."

I cannot think of a greater compliment or accolade given to this parish family than that - a couple in the midst of chaos knowing that their family would be here.

I have often borrowed this from a good friend who explained that in our life we have three families. The first is the one into which we are born; the second comes through long term partnership or marriage; and the third is magic - the one we get to create through important relationships with others.

For welcoming me into your family, thank you is hardly an adequate expression of how much you mean to me.

But today we come full circle again. More accurately, perhaps, you come full circle as you welcome Becky, the interim priest for All Saints. I have absolutely no doubts that all of her basic material needs are already met - food, clothing, water, shelter, and so on.

The great gift you can give her is the same warm welcome, the love, the kindness you have extended to everyone that has come through the door.

After all, there is a line from the theme song of the old television series Cheers that is eternal - we want to go to a place where everyone knows our name. The quest to be recognized is our hope and prayer; to be recognized by others is the blessing.

Perhaps you remember all of those old wanted posters that used to be at Post Offices. The government hoped we'd recognize the individual in the mug shot.

That's not sufficient for a parish family. Recognition is important, but respected - given and earned, is the one thing that matters. Respect, I believe, is the ultimate embodiment of love.

At the first church I served there was an elderly couple who came to every event and meeting at the church. Even after Ray had a stroke and his wife would push him in a wheelchair into the parish hall, they were there. And sometimes, when we had some debates that were getting intense, Ray would interrupt, but holding up his hand a few inches, his index finger raised, and he would slowly and painfully croak out three words, "God is love."

St Paul pointed out to the Corinthians that three elements of life are important - faith, hope, and love, but only love is eternal. Loving others, always making room for a new member of the family, is what you have always done.

Things change here, as they have for the past century and a half, but the love we have for one another and for the traditions of the Episcopal Church will always remain.

Some of those changes begin for you at the end of this month when a new minister will be arriving here. My prayer is that you will welcome here as I was welcomed 29 years ago.

Some of those changes begin for me, as well. At last year's convention a delegate from Good Shepherd in Allegan asked when I was retiring. I said, "funny you should mention that." To my surprise she said, "We've been waiting for that. We want you with us. We've got first dibs!" I begin as their supply cleric on Ash Wednesday, and then on Sundays and one day a week - leading worship, teaching, but above all, spending time with God's people.

So, it is changes all around for us, but as St Paul pointed out - love is eternal. And from now until I fall off my perch, there will always be a place in my heart for this wonderful parish family.