

09/01/2019

God of love, who calls us to live love, may the time we spend listening for your still, small voice awaken an awareness of how we can put love into action, how we can care for all of our relationships. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen

God said to Noah, "I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth. 14 So make yourself an ark of cypress[a] wood; make rooms in it and coat it with pitch inside and out. 15 This is how you are to build it: The ark is to be three hundred cubits long, fifty cubits wide and thirty cubits high. [b] 16 Make a roof for it, leaving below the roof an opening one cubit[c] high all around. [d] (Gen 6)"

Now I know that there could be a whole sermon about whether or not God might be planning a similar event in the near future. The earth today is certainly filled with violence. But what really kept me awake this week was a much more important question. So, how big is a cubit? I found out that this measurement varies according to which civilization has defined it.

Epiphanius of Salamis was a 4th century Bishop in Cypress. He wrote in his treatise 'On Weights and Measures', that it was customary, in his day, to take the measurement of the biblical cubit, which is: a measure, taken from the elbow to the wrist and the palm of the hand, including the middle finger.

So, the Biblical cubit consisted of 6 handbreadths or roughly 20 to 21 inches.

Measurements of the cubit have ranged from 17.5 inches in Ancient Rome to 18 inches in Ancient Greece. Utilizing 20 inches for one cubit would make the Ark about 500 feet long; 50 feet tall; and 83 feet wide.

It was a unit of measurement that was not exact. Most of us simply are not that precise for it to matter. I am sure that Ted might disagree especially in working with wood and building things. Measurements are important even if the definitions of what constitutes a unit of measurement seems to change over time.

But some things simply **never** change. Paul reminds us this morning; “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever”. No changes in definition concerning who Jesus was, who Jesus is, or who He will become. Jesus remains the same. His message **remains the same**. Love God above all else and love our neighbor as much as we love ourselves. Because we are human, how we measure and live out that message has changed over time, not always for the better.

One day, after attending church, President Coolidge found himself in the presence of a newspaper reporter. What was the sermon about, the reporter wanted to know? “Sin,” replied the president.

And what did the preacher have to say about sin? “He was against it.”

Paul was rarely that succinct or direct in his epistles. He tends to be very eloquent and verbose at times. Today, however there is a lot packed into these 10 verses. He mentions:

- Let mutual love continue.
- Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers.
- Remember those who are in prison.
- Let marriage be held in honor by all.
- Let the marriage bed be kept undefiled.
- Keep your lives free from the love of money.
- Be content with what you have.
- Remember your leaders ... and imitate their faith.
- Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have.

You could do a sermon on every single one of these and each is important to our Christian way of life.

But again, although the basic concepts maintain their value, and their intent is clear, how we interpret them in society seems to change.

Following the UMC's General Conference earlier this year, William Willimon, a retired United Methodist bishop who now teaches the practice of Christian ministry at Duke Divinity School, wrote concerning the denomination's debate on same-sex marriage:

"The question of LGBTQ clergy and same-sex marriage, insoluble at a corporate-style global gathering of 800 people, is more or less resolved in every congregation I know. The solution may not be one of which I approve, but in a way that somehow works in the present moment for that congregation, in the place where Christ has assembled them, they muddle through. They may still have great differences; they may have lost members because of their solution. There may be repeated, heated arguments. The pastor may be uneasy with and unsure how to lead their work in progress, but they have practiced forbearance because Jesus told them to. They have discovered the adventure of worshipping the Trinity with people with whom they disagree, because, like it or not, those are the folk whom the Lord has convened and made Methodist. They muddle through". (unquote) The Methodists as a denomination will continue to muddle through it. They don't have a choice if they want to survive.

This is definitely something that we can relate to in the Episcopal Church, even within this congregation. There are many troubling aspects of the human condition that come with us as a church, and about which, we need to practice patience and love toward one another if the church is to have any meaning, not only for the congregation, but also for those who look at us from the outside.

The business of being the church is never a simple matter; disagreements over how to apply biblical principles to life, as straightforward as they seem to be for some, are inevitable given the fact that we are human. But at the same time, we need to do it.

We are followers of Jesus in the company with others who **may not agree** with us on every application of the faith. And that mutual love should remain in force **even** if a time comes, when our disagreements are so strong, that a denomination or congregation decides to split. And we all are aware of instances where a split has occurred. This has affected many congregations in this Diocese and the Episcopal Church as a whole. This is why I feel strongly about staying in the conversation even when we do not agree with one another and setting the example of mutual love and cooperation for those outside of the congregation. I for one, have never said this would be easy and it is not. Especially when families are affected.

There are other issues over which we will be in disagreement but fortunately are not likely to cause folks to leave a congregation or a denomination to split. Racism, immigration, and protecting the environment, are issues we face and need to deal with. And yes, even the decisive issue of gun control is not going away. Five people were killed near Odessa, Tex., yesterday as a gunman started shooting indiscriminately at cars, bringing the number of victims of mass killings by firearms to 51 for the month of August.

These are all important, societal issues in which we as a church still need to muddle through.

Mutual love is a command that does not change. The command to Love comes from and through the Incarnate Jesus.

Incarnation literally means embodied in flesh or taking on flesh. **God made man.**

Thomas H. Troeger, in an article from the The Living Pulpit, in 2006, wrote:

“I once saw a cartoon picturing a lone religious pilgrim with a staff, a cowl, a long beard and a haggard look. Stopped at a fork in the road, the religious seeker faces a sign. One arrow points toward “The meaning of life.” Another arrow points in the opposite direction toward “Cheese and crackers.”

If that pilgrim believes in the Incarnation, he will not hesitate for a second. He will head straight for the cheese and crackers, where others will be gathered to eat and to talk, and perhaps to sing and to dance". He continues:

"The Incarnation affirms that the meaning of life is not an abstract concept, not a vague ideal, not a collection of words and thoughts. Rather we find the meaning of life, in the love and grace of God, as embodied in a particular human being and in the community that gathers around him. Jesus, like us, had a heart that pumped blood and lungs that pumped air. He was not a spirit that floated above the earth but a body whose feet pounded the ground and whose stomach growled when he was hungry.

Those who are his followers are called the body of Christ. When they gather together, they feast on wine and bread, human bodies consuming a meal".

We are able to muddle through difficult times, because we do it together with the Incarnate Jesus in our midst. We need Jesus and we need each other to live the lives we are intended to live.

We thrive when we receive the blessed body and blood of Jesus with each other.

Mutual love is an unchangeable command for all time, and it helps us especially, when muddling through is the only way we can move forward.

It is not a mushy feeling, but a sense of respect and regard for those who share the Christian way of life with us.

We live in the unchangeable reality of the God of Creation, incarnate in our brother Jesus, alive in the Holy Spirit, and enfolded in the mutual love of our sisters and brothers. Love in this sense always thrives and will always win out.

AMEN!