

## LOVE OF GOD AND NEIGHBOR

Last week we celebrated Vocations' Sunday and reflected on the call to imitate Jesus, the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for his sheep. Today we are reminded of the New Commandment that Christ gave us the day before he suffered, the **secret identity** of every Christian, the distinguishing mark: "This is how all will know that you are my disciples," he said, "**if you have love for one another.**" And not just any kind of love, but Christ-like love: "I give you a new commandment... As I have loved you, so you also should love one another."

Early Christian community took Jesus' words to heart. This is illustrated by the testimony of a second century philosopher, who wrote to the emperor, '*Christians love one another. They never fail to help widows; they save orphans from those who would hurt them. If one member of the community has something, he gives freely to those who have nothing.... There is something divine in them.*' The great Church historian, Adolph von Harnack, also noted this extraordinary witness of the Early Christians when he wrote: '*The new language on the lips of Christians was the language of love. But it was more than a language, it was a thing of power and action.*' Their love was not mere words or pious gestures, but a practical love, expressed in deeds of caring service – service especially of the poor and those most in need.

**Love in action** -- that is what we are talking about this morning. Love which finds expression in kindness, courtesy, tolerance, and acceptance of those around us. Jesus calls us to love one another and to bring that love to light in the way that we treat those around us. It is easy to love people in general, to affirm that love is a good thing and something we all need. But it is another thing altogether to put that love into action, to make love concrete in our attitudes and actions toward others. Someone once said, "We are judged by our actions, not our intentions."

It was the kind of love Augustine referred to when he wrote: '*It has hands to help others. It has feet to hasten to the poor and needy. It has eyes to see misery and want. It has ears to hear the sighs and sorrows of people. That is what love looks like.*' We hear a lot about love, but we often do not know what the word really means. We tend to think of love as good feelings toward others. For sure, love includes positive emotions - and it harnesses them. But love - as Jesus describes it - involves much more than feelings. Love resides in the will. St. Thomas Aquinas defined love as "**to will the good of the other.**" Love means to desire what is best for the other person. Your neighbor - your spouse, your child, your co-worker - might need a lot of things, but what the best, what is the greatest thing you will for your neighbor?

There was a family with three strong willed boys. Very often they would end up in arguments and when no solution was possible, they would run to their mother and try to convince her to resolve the issue in their favor. But every time they approached the mother, her only response was "You boys go back and resolve it, but remember you are brothers." It was eventually clear that what was most important to Mother was that we behave, in such a way

that demonstrated our bond as brothers. This was even more important to her than our resolution (which she also expected).

This is what God says to the church. "I know you have differences, but you must struggle to resolve them as brothers and sisters. This is what I expect of you because you are my children." "By this, everyone will know you are my disciples, if you have love for one another".

In St. Paul's letter to Cor 13, he reminds us that there are three things that last, faith, hope and love and the greatest of these is love. Faith and Hope comes to an end at death. But love lasts eternally. As we gather today and hear Jesus' word to us, our prayer is that God would strengthen us for service to God and help us to love one another. We pray that God would use the example of Jesus' love in action to teach us how to love as well, to show us how to give of ourselves for others, and to lift our vision to heaven above and set us afire with faith. Love for one another is the primary witness of the church in the world today. Jesus made that clear when he said, "By this shall all know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

- The sign that you followed Abraham was circumcision.
- The sign that you followed Moses was keeping the Sabbath.
- The sign that you followed John the Baptist was that you were baptized.
- The sign that you follow Jesus Christ is that you love one another.

If at the end of our lives, as we stand before the judgment seat of Christ, we need to hear the Lord say, "My child your feet are weak, your shoes are worn out, because you walked to serve your brothers and sisters who were in need. Your hands are feeble, your eyes are dim because you have given enough in charity, and you saw with compassion the misery of the poor and the suffering." But your heart is still strong to love your God and your neighbor. Come and inherit the kingdom prepared for you. Welcome Home. May we all hear these sweet words from our Lord.

God Bless You.