

**Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
3 September 2023**

Romans 12:19-21 and Matthew 16:21-28

Sometimes I long for easy Christianity. Things would be so much better if all we had to do was come to potluck suppers, parish picnics, fun home studies, beautiful requiem services, and inspiring services in our comfortable, perfectly air-conditioned church. When we go on mission, it would be so much better if we just go to safe areas, stayed in air-conditioned hotels, and engaged in easy work designed exclusively to help us feel good about ourselves. I want more moments of ecstasy, more mountain top experiences, and more good liturgies. Life is so much better when we are at the Mount of Transfiguration! But Christianity is extremely difficult. Only those people who don't take it seriously think Christianity is easy.

It is hard because we follow a crucified Messiah who demands that we love our enemies as we love our friends, that we give the other cheek, and that we take our cross and die with him. Christianity is not a pie in the sky, highly developed rhetoric, and pretty words that don't mean anything. It is love in the real world, it is sacrifice, it is commitment, it is walking the extra mile, it is, ultimately, a relationship with a Messiah who has great expectations of us. This has become a controversial statement in our Denomination, but it is very true. Christ has high expectations of us!

Today, both the Gospel of Matthew and the Epistle to the Romans remind us just how difficult Christianity really is. In the Gospel Jesus calls Peter "Satan" because Peter wants to take the easy way. Things have been going so well: the crowds are growing; Jesus has achieved rock-star status; people are being healed, fed, and liberated from their afflictions; and the crowds stand solidly with Jesus. But now, he has begun to talk about Jerusalem and dying on a cross. Peter wonders, "Why destroy something good? There is no need for this cross, Jesus. There is no need for sacrifice! Can we just continue as we are going? The crowds are loving us, our ministry is growing, people really need you. Can we just build three tents?" Jesus, makes it very clear to Peter today that Christianity requires sacrifice and commitment. There is a price that must be paid and Jesus is willing to pay that price for all of us! But there is also a mandate for those who wish to be his followers. We too are to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him.

Romans spells for us what it means to die to self and to be the type of Christians Christ wants us to be. And it almost sounds like an impossibility. Paul says, "Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers." So far these practices are difficult, but not impossible. They require hard work and dedication, but if we tried hard; we might be able to accomplish them.

But then Romans continues, “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them... Do not repay anyone evil for evil... If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God... No, if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” These are almost impossible tasks.

The month of September is always hard for me because it reminds me of 9-11 and my own nephew’s sacrifice in Iraq. During the next few weeks we are going to be remembering the worse act of terrorism ever committed on American soil. We have tried very hard to forget those events. We no longer see the gruesome images on television, our generation of Millennial kids don’t really understand the fear and the anger we all felt. And one of the things we have forgotten is our own need for justice and for revenge. If we are to be honest, we all wanted someone to pay, we wanted the government to return that sense of security we all had lost. Many felt deep hatred, most felt deep fear. These emotions are all human and natural after a crisis. We hate injustice and we want perpetrators to be held to account.

It is easy to forget the words of Jesus and Paul when we are confronted with such violence. Those words are exceedingly difficult and we can’t say they were just using metaphors. Those demands for peace, forgiveness, and love of enemy apply exactly to times like September 11 and others just like it. I know it is almost impossible to seek to do good to those who seek to do us evil. But we have an example of this type of love in God himself. According to Holy Scripture, we are sinners (Isaiah 53:6, Romans 3:23) who have rebelled against God, we have worshiped other gods and fail to worship our Creator. We act as enemies of God. Scripture tells us that the just penalty for our sin is death. God has the right to avenge his honor. Vengeance is his and his alone! Yet, what God does is just the opposite. He sends his only Son into the world to die for us, to rescue us from ourselves, to liberate us from the chains of evil. Even though we deserve to die, he gives us life through his Son, Jesus Christ.

We also have an example of this radical forgiveness in Jesus, our Messiah. He forgave his persecutors and loved them to the end. Even as he was dying, he cried that his enemies might be forgiven. He never cursed them, even when he was in agony he loved them. And he loves us even in our betrayal and our idolatry. He loves us not because we deserve his love, but rather because he is merciful and full of compassion. Both passages today call us to love our enemies, but lest we believe that all of our enemies live in Iran, Iraq, Russia, or even China let me remind you that this demand of forgiveness and charity towards our enemies also applies to us in our current context. Many of us have ex-husbands and ex-wives. Many of us have folks we have sued and folks who have sued us. All of us have people we don’t like, cantankerous relatives who make our lives difficult, abusive children or friends, and neighbors we can’t tolerate. The demand to forgiveness and love applies to them as well. We must forgive even if we don’t feel like it. This is what God expects from us.

This is extremely hard, but this is exactly what the Collect today calls “True Religion.” True religion requires sacrifice, action, and commitment. It requires that we go above and beyond ourselves to heal a wounded world, or rather, to bring a wounded world to Christ for healing. We are called to take care for those who are in need, to be Christ’s hands and feet in this desolate planet we call “earth,” and those in need are often people we don’t like. We must be God’s mind and God’s words of comfort and love.

For those who want easy religion, without sacrifice; for those who want a church that doesn’t demand anything, doesn’t expect anything, doesn’t require anything, doesn’t hold us accountable for anything; a church that no longer believes in sin, a church that no longer believes in the need for transformation, a church that is very comfortable with the status quo; for those around the world who believe this is the church they want, Matthew and Paul remind us today that true religion is a matter of the heart, and it is a matter of commitment, and it is a matter of engagement, and it is a matter of love.

This week, let us pray for all the victims of natural disasters around the world, but let us go beyond that. Let us also commit ourselves to take care of those who are in need in our own communities, our own towns, and our neighbors. Let us ask God to give us a love for true religion, religion of the heart, religion fully involved in the life of the people God places in our lives. May he continue to bless you. Amen!