

## A Usuallyirate Parishioner..., Easter 6 (B)

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A usually irate parishioner is said to have tackled the pastor after church one Sunday morning. "I'm so glad you preached a historical sermon," she said. The pastor, shocked by this unusual praise beamed thanks. The parishioner continued, "Yes, because I am sick and tired of hearing about love all the time."

It really must be very difficult to be a Christian, and particularly a Lutheran, if one has a problem with the "love thing." In fact, if that is your problem, today would have been a good Sunday to stay at home.

Parting gifts are difficult things to receive. This is particularly so after a death. We are amazed that Uncle Stan left us that enormous Victorian chest of drawers, particularly as he knew we love modern Scandinavian design. It was a shock that Aunt Maude left us the lake house to the great disgust of her children.

We are anticipating the Feast of the Ascension. Jesus was no longer to be a visible, bodily presence among those who love him. Everything was going to change. And so he left gifts. We tend to take those gifts for granted.

Baptism is one of the gifts. Baptism assures us that we are God's adopted family. God has left this gift in a will or covenant, an unbreakable agreement. "We are his people and the sheep of his pasture," as the Psalmist wrote centuries before. Notice that Baptism is not a personal gift. It sets us in a community called the New Israel, the Body of Christ. The trouble with communities is that they can get to fighting.

Jesus gave us the Eucharist. Like Baptism, it is a very simple thing. We eat bread, drink wine, and know it is the Lord. Once again, the Eucharist is not a personal thing, it is a community meal in which Jesus is “made up” or portrayed by the whole assembly or community. The trouble with communities is that they can get to fighting.

The Scriptures are God’s gift to us. God speaks through the lives of the writers. And yet the community for whom the Bible is given can get to fighting.

Jesus gave us the Church, the community of all the faithful, dead, living, and to come. The Church is not a building where one goes to get something. It is “the blessed company of all faithful people”. The Church is an activity towards God and others. It is a community. The trouble with communities is that they can get to fighting.

Over and over again we return to the context in which these gifts are given. That context is a community we name the Church. We best know it here, now, at the local level. Perhaps we know something of it as a synod, or as the national church, or even beyond to the Lutheran World Federation. It would be odd if we didn’t recognize that the great problem the Church faces is human dysfunction.

“You’ve moved the candlesticks. I am going to campaign to get them out where they have always been.” “I’ve worked so hard and no one has recognized me so I’m leaving.” All the taking sides, quarrels, and, sometimes, nastiness that goes on suggests a radical dysfunction. Love is the ignored gift of God.

The greatest gift Jesus gave us was love. He gave the gift and issued a new commandment “that you should love one another.” Without love, none of the other gifts

is of any use. If our parish is loveless, it isn't a place of Christian worship. It's a "damnable" place.

We have to remember what love means in the Christian vocabulary. It does not mean sentimentality. It does not mean warm fuzzy feelings. In the Epistle, the writer says some very profound words.

"Everyone who loves is born of God, for God is love...God loved us and sent his son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins."

That passage may mean something like this: The capacity to demonstrate self-sacrificial love is a sign that we have been possessed by God. God's love is shown in Jesus' death. In Jesus' selfless gift of life itself, sin (which means living apart from God), is destroyed. Sin is the ultimate dysfunction, the ultimate way of saying, "I don't need you and if I can't have my own way I'm going to go home and sulk." When we start to reach out to others, particularly when it is inconvenient, when it hurts, when we have to suffer for it, God is obviously at work in our lives through Jesus.

C.S. Lewis wrote:

"Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. The alternative to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy, is damnation. The only place where you can be perfectly safe from all the perturbations of love is Hell."

And yet the risk of love, the tragedy that comes from love, the death to all sorts of things that occur in love, is more than compensated when we open ourselves together to that loving peace which is given with "the knowledge and love of God in Christ Jesus."

It is this shared, giving, dying, rising love which creates the Church and sustains it, creates us in God's image and sustains us, and creates that good in the world which changes the worst for the best.