

Sermon for Proper 17A  
Sunday, September 3, 2017  
“The Transformational Church”

Text: Romans 12:9-21

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Last Sunday, you may remember that I spoke about what it meant to be “the church. I hope you remember that being “the church,” the *ekklesia*, means that we have been called out, set apart as the assembly that gathers to witness and proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. I focused on the Gospel lesson in which Jesus charged St. Peter with the building of the Church and as heirs of Peters charge, we are the Church, the people who are gather together and are called out to be the witnesses and proclaimers of Jesus Christ in the world in our own time. Today, I would like to focus on the Epistle reading from Paul’s Letter to the Romans. The epistle lesson comes on the heels of what we read last week that called on the hearers of Paul’s letter to offer themselves as whole, complete, and living sacrifices to God, recognizing the importance of each and every one of them as members of the Body of Christ. “We, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another,” Paul wrote. Today’s passage goes deeper into Paul’s exposition on what it means to be a part of the Christian Church, part of a 1<sup>st</sup> Century Jesus Movement, and he does so by offering examples of how being a living sacrifice is utterly transformative for ourselves and for those around us. Paul was probably speaking to non-believers or the newly converted on how to be the Church, but it has much to say to us in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Paul first admonishes us “to let love be genuine.” Two things are important about what he is saying here: first, Paul is talking about deep, unconditional, and complete love—the kind of love that God shows toward us—and that love should be not only genuine and sincere, as many translations say, but also non-hypocritical, which is how the original Greek text says it. When we call ourselves Christian, we are saying that we are “all in,” totally invested in proclaiming Christ. But then Paul goes on to say that we should love one another with “mutual affection”; that is to say that in addition to the unconditional love that we should have deep in our hearts, we should also love each other as though we were sisters and brother. In scripture, when references are made to

family and kin, that means that it is of utmost importance; we are to take special note. What are we supposed to do? Outdo one another in showing honor, be ardent in spirit, rejoice in hope, persevere in prayer, and contribute to the needs of the saints—he means the members of the Christian community—and always show hospitality to strangers.

And then Paul charges the Church to do something completely radical: he points out that Christian living means loving the very people who try to cause us harm, to hang out with the marginalized, and refrain from vengeance. You see this is a strong deviation from the Hebrew Scriptures which says that it's ok to take “an eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth,” and not to hang out with sinners and foreigners. To feed the hungry and give drink to the thirsty, even and especially if they are our enemies, because they're not expecting it. The people and forces of the world expect retaliation, anger, hostility, and violence, but the Christian response is to overcome evil with good. That might be hard to do. The forces of the world are all around us making the tv news and on the internet. They threaten, they shout insults, they march, but how are we to respond? With love. With respect. With radical hospitality.

We are facing an opportunity to engage in radical hospitality right here at All Saints. As many of you know, today All Saints Lutheran Church begins worshipping with us today. Let me first extend a radical welcome to any of you who come to us from All Saints Lutheran. Last week we heard the words of Paul that called the Christian community out as the body of Christ with many its members, its many gifts and talents, to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ in unity. These lectionary readings last week and this week are speaking to us. Isn't it funny how often it seems that the lectionary, or the sermon, is speaking directly to us? God is speaking directly to us, as we embark on a partnership that will bring us to love one another with mutual affection, to serve the Lord with zeal, to rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, and persevering in prayer. We are all members of the body of Christ, and we have come together to add to the gifts that we already had as separate worshipping communities in order to build up Christ's church, the *ekklesia*, those of us who have been called out as witnesses to the transformative power of God through Jesus Christ. Through this partnership, we can be stronger witnesses to each other by sharing our stories, showing each other love, and using our many gifts. But we will

also be a strong team that will be able to go out into the world and transform it. Two diverse parts of Christ's body are banding together to make a difference in this community and in the world. What an incredible blessing!

I know it's scary for all of us, because so much is still uncertain. It's all so new and so fast, some of you may feel like you're being pulled faster than your feet can take you, but God usually does his best work by pulling out of our comfort zones. It's up to us to trust him. Those of you who are coming from All Saints Lutheran, you are grieving at the loss of your beloved home church where you worshipped, prayed, rejoiced, cried, got married, buried your loved ones, invested your time, talent and treasure. You have left behind a part of your story. We at All Saints Episcopal understand; we know your pain and grief. Four years ago this October, we left our home in Richmond Hill where we had journeyed since 1897—116 years—and moved here to this space in Woodhaven. It hasn't been easy; we're still finding our way, but this has become our home. In November, we will be celebrating our 120<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in grand All Saints style. Now that you're here, you can help us celebrate!

Now that you're here, we can begin the work toward being partners in ministry and show the Church, the Woodhaven community, and the world what it looks like when sisters and brothers in Christ come together in unity to proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord through our expression of the traditions of the Church, our love and respect for each other, and our mission to transform the lives of others. Amen.