

## 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time – NOTES

**Ezekiel 33:7-9; PS 95:1-2, 6-7, 8-9; ROM 13:8-10; MT 18:15-20**

I have been moved this week by reading, watching and learning more about the beloved actor, Chadwick Boseman, who died recently at the young age of 43. Playing the first Black Super Hero, Black Panther, Boseman's life and legacy will never be forgotten. In the movie Black Panther, he plays King T'Challa (who is also Black Panther) – king and protector of the fictional African nation of Wakanda. As King T'Challa, he addresses the United Nations stating, "We must find a way to look after one another as if we were one single tribe." This powerful statement speaks not only to Boseman's legacy, but also to the popular cultures cry for help. Our culture is crying out with sighs too deep for words, yet, with actions often contrary to those very sighs. "We must find a way to look after one another."

In our Scriptures this morning, I believe the apostle Paul, and Jesus, our eternal King, offer vital and essential ways we are to "look after one another as if we were all one tribe."

First and foremost, Paul writes "**Owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another.**"

These words from St. Paul in Romans are enough to ponder, reflect and seek to live by for the rest of our lives. What a different place our nation and world would be in if we all sought wholeheartedly to "owe nothing to anyone, except to love."

The Greek word for love used here is "agape". It means a love that is unconditional. A love that chooses to love no matter what the conditions. A love that seeks the good of the other. It is the very love God has for each of us. It is the love embodied in Jesus on the cross.

The cross of Christ is a witness to God's "agape" love for us.

Last week I mentioned that our lives are our cross. To pick up our cross and follow Jesus is to pick up our lives, get up every day, and let our lives be witnesses to God's love. To pick up the cross of our lives is to live wholeheartedly for God and wholeheartedly for others.

However, to love others and live wholeheartedly for others is no easy task. In fact, most of the time it is harder to love others than to love God. Why? Among many reasons is conflict. We have a difficult time in community because we have a difficult time with conflict.

Who likes conflict? I don't! And to be honest, I am not very good at addressing it. I am much better at forgiveness than reconciliation. I can forgive someone without ever seeking reconciliation. Yet, the cross of Jesus is a cross of forgiveness and reconciliation. God forgives and reconciles, unites us to Godself.

Since the cross of Jesus brings forgiveness and reconciliation, and reveals God's wholehearted and unconditional love for us, the cross of our lives is meant for reconciliation with others as well. If our lives are our cross, then we must love others with our lives. This means being willing to do the work, often hard work, of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Maybe this is why Jesus in our Gospel lesson gives some concrete steps to reconcile with our brothers and sisters. We need each other and as God's beloved children we are called to live together as signs to the world of God's love, forgiveness, joy and reconciling mercy.

We are called to be signs to the world and to the popular culture that there is a way "to watch out for each other as if we were all one tribe." It is the way of the cross – God's way of love, forgiveness and reconciliation.

One of the biggest gifts and challenges in the Christian life is that God adopts us into God's family. Thus, the Christian life, while being very intimate and personal (God loves each of us personally, knows us and calls us each by name), is also intentionally communal. Jesus highlights this in our Gospel when he says, "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." We are created for community.

Yet, living in community, as couples, family, friends, church, or an organization is not easy. Much of the heartache and division we see in our world today has to do with our inability to live in community well. As I mentioned earlier, our inability to address conflict well.

I heard a sad statistic the other day. Divorce rates in May, June, and July were up 30% from last year. The commentator who mentioned the news suggested it was because couples are spending more time together working from home due to COVID. The additional time together caused more conflict and relational challenges. We need God's help!

The first thing Jesus suggests we do when a brother or sister has hurt us or sinned against us is to go to them ourselves.

I have a feeling if we had the courage and the grace to go to our brother or sister who has hurt us and honestly and lovingly share with them and listen to them, (as Jesus suggests we do) we would see remarkable healing of relationships in our world.

What if we were willing to address conflict and difficult situations with LOVE? What if we "Owed nothing to anyone, but to love one another"?

What if in seeking to forgive and reconcile with our brothers and sisters we sought to L.O.V.E. (**L**isten with **O**pen **V**ulnerable **E**ngagement).

On the cross Jesus **L**istened to the cries of the poor. He listened to the believers and the scoffers. Jesus listened.

On the cross Jesus was **O**pen to others. Jesus' outstretched arms on the cross are signs of his openness to all, no matter what!

On the cross Jesus was **V**ulnerable. Jesus didn't grasp at power or demand his own way. Instead, he humbly served others and gave his life as a sacrifice that we might have life.

On the cross Jesus **E**ngaged the sin of the world. Jesus didn't run from conflict, but lovingly and sacrificially engaged it. Jesus' humble engagement brought forth resurrection, forgiveness, reconciliation and new life.

As God's beloved children and members of the family of God, we have the awesome privilege of picking up the cross of our lives and being signs to the world and the popular culture of God's unconditional love.

"We must find a way to look after one another as if we were one single tribe." Yes, It is the way of unconditional LOVE, the way of the cross.

May the cross of our lives reveal and reflect the love of Jesus, a love that **L**istens with **O**pen **V**ulnerable **E**ngagement.

I will pray for you and ask that you pray for me.

God bless you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Deacon Steve