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AMDG

Proper 12A – July 30, 2017

Today's readings are about God's love - pure and simple. They describe the immensity and extravagance of God's love, and they remind us that God's love frees us to do live our lives fearlessly.

In the Gospel today Jesus shared the last of the seven parables of the Kingdom of God, each one describing a little differently how radical God's love is.

God's love is so great it can start like a small seed, but can grow to be a huge plant.

God's love is so powerful a tiny bit can completely transform – like yeast leavening flour into bread dough.

God loves us so much that he would give everything in order to have us near him – like a merchant selling everything to buy a field where he's hidden a treasure or to buy one beautiful pearl. Or in realizing the awesomeness of God's love, we would give anything to have it.

These parables give us very colorful images of how amazing God's love is. But, they also tell us something more. See, in the Middle East, the mustard plant is an unwelcome weed, and it can take over a garden or field. And, leaven, which makes dough rise, in the ancient world, didn't come in little packets, but came from leftover pieces of dough that had gone sour, just as starter is used for sourdough bread of today. In the Bible, leaven is often used as a symbol of contamination or impurity.

And, in ancient Palestine, anyone who made a shrewd purchase, without fully disclosing being honest about what was hidden in the field, for example, would be considered dishonest, and people would avoid dealing with him. And, someone who sold all he had to buy one beautiful pearl, would be considered foolish or even crazy. And, I think that probably holds true, today. So, these parables, while they describe the kingdom of God as something huge and extravagant, they also suggest that our response to that love should be a bit rebellious. The Kingdom of God can be invasive and go against society's ideas of what is good, proper, and sensible.

So, if responding to God's love can go against what normal people would do, don't we run the risk of upsetting people or even being rejected, maybe even harassed. Well, that's where Paul's wonderful words of encouragement come in. In Paul's letter to the Romans he reassures us that God's love is so enduring it cannot be lost. God loved us from the beginning of Creation and will love us forever. Paul was writing to a group of new believers in Rome - some were Jews, some Gentiles - and they were having some disagreements in the group and were also afraid of possible persecutions. Paul reminds them that the love they have in Jesus Christ will carry them through any challenges they might face. He tells them that they must stop their unchristian behaviors so they can work together to spread God's love in the world. So, with all these colorful descriptions and reassurances of God's love, what stops us from loving others as God loves us? Why are there still wars, why is there hatred, why is there bigotry, and resentment? Why aren't Christians out in droves healing the world with God's love? What stops us?

Quite simply fear.

Fear is a powerful motivator. And, while nothing can separate us from the reality of God's love, fear can blind us to that love and force us to live our lives thinking that we are alone and have to struggle for everything we need and want. Paul lists many of the things we fear - hardship, persecution, famine, peril, death. And, we could add our own list - fear of pain, injury, disease, and poverty, Fear of rejection; fear of not having enough, fear of being uncomfortable... We all have those fears. And, too often they dictate how we live.

Though, I might know in my head that my fears can't separate me from God's love, the fears in my heart can grow and drown out God's love and make me forget my responsibility to spread that love. Fear tells me I've got to beat someone to the punch, or they will get the better of me. Fear compels me to try to impress others, or believe that if I don't do as others expect of me I will be rejected and be lonely. Fear causes me to hold on tightly to what I have, because I may not have enough to be happy.

I believe fear is in the hearts of those who act hatefully and unjustly towards people who are different or those who are vulnerable. Fear is in

the hearts of our leaders who care more about protecting their egos, or ideologies or political beliefs than working together to solve the problems of our country. Fear is at the heart of the divisiveness in our country. It is fear that stands in the way of justice, that poisons relationships, and to causes us keep silent when we see a wrongs being committed. Fear prevents us from taking risks, from letting go of things that are unhealthy for us. In short, fear prevents us from living the God life, because we can't live in fear and love freely.

Recently, I read about an Israeli nurse, who put aside her fears to do what was right. She was trying to feed a Palestinian baby whose mother was gravely ill, and whose father had been killed in a car accident. The baby wouldn't take milk from the bottle, no matter how long she tried, and so the Jewish nurse offered the baby her own breast and was able to get it to feed. The Palestinian aunts hugged the nurse and said they didn't think a Jewish woman would have offered to feed a Palestinian baby. The nurse was shocked that they thought this, and believed any Jewish mother would have done the same. So, to prove this she posted on an Israeli Facebook page, asking for volunteers to feed the boy. She received more than one thousand responses, with women offering to drive as far as 70 miles to help the baby. While stories like this may be a bit surprising, they shouldn't be, because they happen all the time when we let go of our fears, and remember that nothing can separate us from God's immense love.

But, we can't just wish our fears away. And, fear, as an emotion, isn't bad. Just like sadness, joy, disgust, and anger, these feelings were given to us by God and serve a purpose in our lives. Fear is meant to protect us. We shouldn't ignore fear. We should feel our fear, and accept that it is part of being human. But, it is only a feeling; it isn't everything. We should be able to feel our fears and move past them. They shouldn't be a way of life. Allowing fear to take over our lives, will eventually shut out God's love.

In my own life, I've found that when I am frozen by fear, simply carrying out an act of love is enough to get past the fear. It's part of the mystery of God's love. Like the mustard seed, just a little love applied reaps an abundance. But, sometimes fear can be so powerful, that simply loving others is not enough to dispel it. Fear of loneliness and rejection

are the greatest of these fears. It is then that we must pray. The verses from Paul's letter to the Romans have always helped me move past my fear. When I'm afraid of what others think of me, or when I'm afraid of doing what's right, they're like a shield of armor - "If God is for me, who can be against me." and "Nothing can separate me from the love of God" ... "If God is for me, who can be against me." and "Nothing can separate me from the love of God in Christ."

But we don't need the right words to pray for strength to move past fear. In today's reading from Paul he says "The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words." The Holy Spirit knows what we need before we even ask all we need is the willingness and she prays for us.

God loves us so much that God became love in Jesus Christ to show us how to live our lives fearlessly and love others just like God loves us. As long as we remember nothing can separate us from God's love, we can be confident we'll always be able to count on God to guide us, protect us, and bless us, no matter what challenges we might face.