

The Rev. T. Stewart Lucas
St. Margaret's Church
May 17, 2009
Easter VI B
I John 4:7-21; John 15:9-17

In the name of the one who commands us to love. AMEN.

In just a few hours I will be on a plane to Atlanta, Georgia for the 2009 Festival of Homiletics. It is always the highlight of my year, this week of continuing education. I'll hear many sermons and hear lectures about the art of preaching. This year Desmond Tutu will be there. I couldn't help but share this news because I'm so excited, but on second thought it's probably not a very bright idea, knowing that I will have to step back into this pulpit in a few weeks with even greater expectations placed upon me! Oh well, I guess we all learn from our mistakes.

At the last Festival of Homiletics I attended in Nashville, we talked about the definition of a sermon. Indeed if you look up the word sermon online or in a dictionary you will find several meanings:

1. A religious discourse delivered as part of a church service OR
2. An often *lengthy* and *tedious* speech of **reproof** or *exhortation* OR
3. A talk about a religious topic in a *boring* and *tiresome* way.

Likewise, I learned the definition of the word preach:

1. To give people advice on their morals or behavior in an *irritatingly tedious* or *overbearing* way.

I hope that I learned enough that I will never give a sermon or preach according to those definitions!

Preparing a sermon is not an easy task for me. Sometimes it's like pulling teeth to be quite honest. I read the lessons by Tuesday. On Wednesday I might read a few scholarly journals or textual criticisms. By Thursday I've talked to any of my friends who might be preaching, and we share ideas. By Friday, I have an idea, usually from something that has happened in my life during the week, but it's usually not on paper. By Saturday if the sermon is not finished, I'm in a pretty bad mood and tend to take it out on anyone around me. By lunchtime on Saturday I may have already cursed the Holy Spirit, wondering why in the world she is taking so much time putting her words into my laptop. Preparing a sermon is not an easy task for me.

The task of preaching sometimes involves struggling with the difficult texts of the Bible. There are many of those difficult stories in the Bible, from verses that proscribe judgment and violence to the improper treatment of women. We don't fully understand how we are supposed to look at the holiness codes in the Torah, and Paul always seems to have some long run-on sentence that can boggle our minds for weeks at a time because he never gets to the point and uses too many words to explain what he is try to say to us about his incredibly perfect life in Christ.

These are the passages that usually consume our scholars, and we can find many ways to deal with these writings. One way is to say that the Bible was originally a collection of stories passed down from many generations and the cultural geographical context must be the reason that we can't fully understand its meaning. We could also just throw these difficult passages up in the air and use the old phrase "God's ways are not our ways." Those are pretty easy answers for some of the most confusing verses.

But in my relatively few years of life on this planet and even fewer years in the ordained ministry, I have realized that **the passages that disturb me the most are not the ones I don't understand, but rather the ones I do.**¹ This morning's gospel lesson is remarkably easy to understand. I understand it pretty well, and I imagine you do too. God loves us. God loved us so much that God sent Jesus into the world. God loved Jesus, and Jesus loved us. We are commanded to love one another. The end. Easy enough.

But how do you love the person who cuts in front of you in the grocery store parking lot for the perfect space? How do you love the lady who woke you up on Saturday morning at 7am when you were trying to sleep late and then says, "Oh, I must have the wrong number." How do you love the person who steals your identity and charges thousands of dollars on your credit card? How do you love your family member who is still contesting your loved one's will? How do you love your elected officials who are not making the decisions you would have them make on your behalf?

Love one another. It is the most simple and yet most difficult instruction of the entire Bible.

We have been reading over the past few weeks from the book of Acts and hearing the stories of the beginning of the mission to the Gentiles. The followers of Jesus were also struggling with this commandment to love as they faced the issue of the inclusion of non-Jews who received the Holy Spirit. They were facing their own fears and prejudices about those who were outside of their own inner circle. Their challenge was then, as our is now, to understand and feel God's love for them so deeply that they could not help but love one another, and those different from them, just as Jesus did.

Each of us knows what that love feels like. The unconditional love of our God is indescribable. We cannot put a price, or a picture, or a limit on it. But the church was not created so that we could remain inside keeping the comfort of that love to our selves. Instead, we are commanded to let that love flow from these doors, flow from our bodies into the world where it may others lives and bring forth justice and peace. The psalmist celebrates our belief in a God who "will rule the earth with justice, and the peoples with equity" (Psalm 98:9), for "Justice without love is tyranny, and love without justice is sentimentality." When we are tempted to settle for the narrow expressions of human justice, the command of the kingdom compels us to seek out the transformative power of God's justice and God's love, the love that redeems and brings new life, not death.

¹ This thought is borrowed from The Rt. Rev. Frank K. Allan, Retired Bishop of Atlanta in a sermon delivered at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Macon, Georgia on May 18, 2003.

I believe that God's goal is not to bring the world into the church, but to bring the church into the world. But taking the love of God into the world takes each and every one of us working together. Taking the love of God into the world requires each and every one of us to become not just hearers of the word, but doers and preachers of the word. Yes, I firmly believe that Lori and Nancy and I are not the only preachers in this church this morning. I think that the most powerful sermons ever heard or experienced are the ways in which each and every one of you lives your lives.

These past few months have been difficult in all of our lives because of the economic uncertainty. The past couple of years have been uneasy as we have learned what it means to live in a world and in a country faced with international threats, war, poverty and turmoil. The outcome of these events has at times seemed out of our control. But it is exactly at these times when we are called to preach. We are each called to preach the reconciling love of God through Jesus Christ. We each know that love, because we are each called to the altar every week in our brokenness, accepted for who we are.

So go. Walk out those doors into your lives, onto the streets, into your homes, into your families, into your workplaces. Preach in word, but preach also in deed. Love one another in everything that you do. In your sitting down next to your neighbor on a park bench, in your rising up from your desk everyday to deal with your boss. Love as you give out a bag of groceries from the food pantry, love as you send out your next email. Love one another as you drive, and as you shop, as you eat, and as you talk. Go into all the world and preach the Gospel of the Lord who commands us to love and who has placed great expectations upon our sermons. AMEN.