

## **Sermon by Rev. Lusmarina Campos Garcia**

based on Romans 12:9-21

31st of August, 2008

Yesterday I was looking for a poem to start this sermon. Not finding an appropriate one, I was closing the book when I saw a dedication on the front page: "to my pastor, with admiration and eternal love." The handwriting was Eden's, the organist with whom I worked in the parish in Rio. I feel embraced by these simple, straightforward words tasting eternity, because I know those words are genuine. "Let love be genuine", says the Epistle reading this morning. Love that is sincere is not always kind, but it is not always tough either. It does not always agree, but it does not need to insist in disagreeing. It says the truth, but it realizes when it is time to be silent. Genuine love is honest; honest to the point of hurting, but if it is only hurtful, it is no longer love.

In the context of a Christian community, love can very easily become insincere when it is seen as something that has to be shown: "we may think through what action love requires and do it â but only in order to show others that we love, or to satisfy ourselves that we are doing our duty", says Ernest Best. Christian love goes beyond being a duty; it is the very core of our being. When we were having our dialogue on Blessing last year I had a conversation with a person who told me: I know love is the main value for Christians, so, let us put love aside and talk about the issue. "Let us put love aside" is not an option for Christians. Neither can love be insincere. What do we do when we are not able to love someone and that is the very thing we are called to do? First, we have to pray day and night asking for God's mercy until we are filled with the same love God has for us. Second, we have to deal with the other whom we hate or find disgusting or who is indifferent to us.

"Let love be genuine" is the starting point of several ethical principles the apostle Paul establishes for the Romans and for us. Dan Nelson says: "Having asserted the unity of Christians in the 'one body' in the epistle reading last Sunday, Paul now goes on to give counsel to the Christians. They are the demands that life in the Christian community makes" on those who are part of it. They are principles calling us to peace, to harmony, to disarm ourselves. They are values helping us to explore what is positive in us, trusting to God's transformation all in us that remains harmful.

I would like to invite you to read the text with me, slowly.

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay,' says the Lord.' No, 'if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Can we live according to these principles? Which one for you is the most difficult to follow?

We all try to live according to the ethics we inherited, to live right. And some of us might "view righteousness as based on the hatred of evil, the use of fire to fight fire and seeking retribution upon the enemy. Paul warns us not to depend on our own wisdom, but rather to leave vengeance to God. Jesus' admonition, 'Love your

enemies and pray for those who persecute you' (Matthew 5:44) which underlies all truly Christian righteousness is taken up here. The righteous life of Christians is not just good, it is a particular kind of goodness, a goodness grounded in genuine love and active in doing good to one's enemies. We are not to allow our efforts on behalf of righteousness to destroy the good. Rather than using evil to overcome evil, we are to 'overcome evil with good' (Romans 12:21)" teaches Nelson. And more than that, we are not to be overcome by evil. We have a choice. If we hate, hate grows in us. If we nurture the sense of vengeance, the sense of vengeance will fill us. If we give space to evil, evil might take us over. Don't accumulate anxiety on top of anxiety. Don't let fear pervade your mind. Don't let suffering be duplicated within your heart. Don't make a war out of a word. Don't let desperation divide your soul. Calm down! Breath! Leave in God's hands all that is a heavy burden to you. Let the wind of God's grace refresh your mind, your body, your heart. Let us support each other starting by loving each other with a genuine love.

Rev. John Moyer said last Sunday, "In Christ our moments of aggression, our moments of hate and hostility, our moments of despair and doubt, our moments of grief and pain are all transformed into new moments of loving and being loved. This is the priesthood of all believers. This is our job".

After the creed, the Congregational Committee will be installed and we will present Sebastian and Alexander who were baptized last Friday. Friday was the only day when the families of Amy and Wim could be together.

Will we receive and love genuinely Alexander and Sebastian? Will we support our Congregational Committee so no evil overcomes them or us? Will we have words that embrace them, words tasting eternity? Amen.