

17th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year A July 2013 Deacon Mike Walsh

Love Letters and more from St. Paul

A few weeks back I found myself on a bit of an archeological expedition. The trip did not require any real hardship or adventure. It was not a tale like one finds in an Indiana Jones movie.

Instead, it took place in the living room of my mother-in-laws home. We had been given a task by her adult daughters to locate a long-lost family recipe for something called "coogan". I have no idea what a "coogan" is or looks like so I was at somewhat of a disadvantage.

The two of us started to pour through old cookbooks, which were carbon dated (ok trademarked) sometime in the late 50's or early 60's.

We had no success in finding the mysterious "coogan" recipe which is missing to this day, but we did uncover this artifact.

For you, younger folks here today this is what was called a "letter" in the olden days.

This particular letter was composed with a ball point pen in what historians call cursive writing. It is a missive from my mother-in-laws sister Val so you could call it one of the letters from Val to her sister Pearl. On last page was a recipe for BBQ sauce.

The front page starts this way with Val's sharing:

"He's the man that sits at her table along with his wife. He had just had his morning coffee, went to his room and died before the doctor got there. Nice way to go but it was quite a shock to everyone."

You might be asking yourself what in the world does this long lost letter from one sister to another have to do with today's readings?

Good question.

Today I would like to talk to you about the letters of love from St. Paul to us his brothers and sisters in Markham.

Now let's be honest. Many of us just don't get these letters, or better stated snippets of letters which make up the second reading.

They can be complicated, perhaps confusing and at times downright infuriating to some. Does the quote "wives be subject to your husbands" raise any eyebrows?

Saul (his Jewish name) was born into a privileged family most likely in the town a Tarsus in what is we know today as Turkey. His father was a successful tradesman, and he raised his family in Jerusalem.

Saul was educated, spoke and wrote Greek. He became one of the Pharisees and by all accounts, he was zealous in his work to maintain the purity of the Jewish faith. He ruthlessly insured that the people

followed the letter of the law. One scholar I read suggested if we thought of Saul as a member of the modern-day Taliban, we would have a good idea of what he was like.

Most of us know that on the road to Damascus Saul has an encounter with the risen Christ and over the course of the next few days with the help of another disciple, Saul becomes Paul.

He becomes a man who is not just changed but who is completely transformed by the love that is Jesus the Christ.

What does he do with his new-found faith in the risen Christ?

Paul changes the world.

He makes at least three pilgrimages throughout the known world establishing communities.

To keep in touch with them, he writes them letters. He answers their questions and provides direction to these new and fragile communities.

One thing Paul is not intending to do with his letters is to write scripture. His intention was not that this would become a 'gospel' but as it turned out over 1/3 of what we call the New Testament is written either by Paul or in some cases by one of his followers.

Time will not permit an extensive or even cursory look at the teachings of Paul.

My purpose today is to encourage you to listen attentively when you hear the words "According to St. Paul" read aloud.

Most of the time the reading from Paul will be his attempt to explain the "Mystery of Faith."

After his transformational experience and encounter with Jesus, the sharing of the mystery of faith becomes Paul's primary passion. He completely changes his life and embarks on a mission to share this mystery with everyone not just his Jewish brothers and sisters.

So what is the Mystery of Faith?

You all know it- in fact; we acclaim it during each mass.

Immediately following the consecration the priest sings the words: The Mystery of Faith.

And we answer with what is called the Memorial Acclamation.

This is another of the changes with the new Roman Missal. There are a few options that the choir has to choose from but they all essentially declare:

We proclaim your Death, O Lord,
and profess your Resurrection
until you come again.

It is the old form of the Memorial Acclamation; however, that might help us to better understand what St. Paul is trying to share with us through his letters:

Christ has died;
Christ is risen;
Christ will come again.

Paul tells us through his letters, in the most remarkable ways, that there is really nothing we can do that can impact the way God feels about us.

Following the law, obeying the rules and doing things don't matter.

Paul it turns out is not a moralist. He is not one that would rush into any Christian Church and start proclaiming dogma or talking about sin in the traditional way.

Instead, he would look at each of us and ask us simply; do you believe in the mystery of faith?

If we answer yes, then the level of the discussion will be so much deeper than who is right and wrong about the rules- about the law.

Let's listen again to today's reading using the Mystery of Faith as your guide.

I say to you the words: The Mystery of Faith:

Join me in saying:

Christ has died.
Christ is risen.
Christ will come again.

Now listen to the reading:

Brothers and sisters:

You were buried with him in baptism,
in which you were also raised with him
through faith in the power of God,
who raised him from the dead.
And even when you were dead
in transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh,
he brought you to life along with him,
having forgiven us all our transgressions;
obliterating the bond against us, with its legal claims,
which was opposed to us,
he also removed it from our midst, nailing it to the cross.

My friends I encourage you to make this the summer of St. Paul. Include reading at least one of his "Love" letters in their entirety.

Allow yourself to be swept up and transformed by the mystery of faith the same way Saul, who became Paul allowed himself to be on that trip to Damascus.

If you allow this to happen, then you will come to know what it means to "Go in Peace and to glorify the Lord with your newly transformed life. "