Emmanuel Church

Geneva Switzerland

XIII Pentecost 2017

Romans 12: 9-21

The Rt. Rev. Pierre W. Whalon

A new rector’s arrival is a chance for reviewing where we’ve come from and where we’re going. I’ve been your Bishop for sixteen years. Nicholas Porter was still new when I made my first-ever visitation, on Advent I, 2001. And here we are welcoming Canon Michael to Emmanuel. He has now my full authorization to serve you in my place, and that of my successors. So as he is your new Rector, I am inviting him to celebrate the Eucharist in my place today.

The point of being a rector is the parish. The point of being a parish is that every Christian needs a community. While some think you can worship Jesus on a golf course, the fact is that alone, each of us is prone to wander. As the hymn says, “Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it/Prone to leave the One I love.” Only together can we keep the promises of Baptism, which — let me remind you — start with the spiritual forces of wickedness, the evil powers of this world, and our own sinful desires. If you think the Evil One is just a childhood fantasy, you haven’t been following the news. Or you haven’t walked up rue du Monthoux recently. And have you wondered whether you contribute to the evil powers of this world, or why you keep doing the thing you know is wrong?

No, we are all prone to wander, including me, your Sinner-in-chief, and so we need each other. We have to live in a community. A parish is an extended family of Christians who are turned not only toward one another, but to the city around them, “and away to the ends of the earth.” Emmanuel is such a parish. And as an exercise to see where we’ve been and where we are now going together with Canon Michael, let’s take a moment to evaluate our common life in light of what Saint Paul is saying in today’s Epistle.

Each line points up an aspect of our parish’s life. How are we doing with “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”? As Presiding Bishop Michael Curry says, “If it’s not about love, it’s not about God.” How are we on the “genuine love” score? How is that “mutual affection” for one another?

One metaphor I keep coming back to is that parish life is like a boot camp for love, for how to live in Paradise. We are all going to be together with God, so we might as well start learning how to live that life here and now, warts and all.

“Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.” How’s our passion for Jesus these days? The Gospel must be proclaimed with passion, with ardor, or else it starts to sound too easy. God’s love for us is not that of an indulgent grand-daddy: it is fierce, unyielding, and seeks to burn away the dross of our lives and refine the gold that God placed there. This happens through the cross that each of us must carry if we are to follow Jesus. How’s that zeal doing?

“Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.” Hope is essential to human beings. Without it we die.

When I was a new deacon, the bishop in his infinite wisdom put me in charge of a parish that was slated to be closed, after great turmoil and suffering under my predecessor — who himself suffered greatly as well. I came out of seminary on fire to preach faith, justification by faith alone. I met the people I was forced to take, and who were forced to take me as well, and furthermore, their way of life was dying. The collapse of industry in western Pennsylvania meant that almost every family had a member laid off from work.

There I stood, pompously preaching faith from my Greek New Testament (I’m ashamed to say), until it dawned on me that these people had plenty of faith. What they desperately lacked was hope. So I put away the Greek and learned to preach hope. I haven’t stopped since. And my little parish survived me, and is still open today.

“Be patient in suffering”, for it will come to an end. Really. But meanwhile, persevere in prayer, and not only in prayer, but in believing. I have come to understand that the greatest Christian virtue is the one that seems the least interesting: perseverance. Every day, as Luther said, we need to hear the Gospel again and be convicted. We need to persevere. Every day. How’s our perseverance? Do we need to get back on that narrow highway of daily choosing to have faith?

“Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.” The needs of the saints isn’t just about paying the light bill at Emmanuel, although it is that as well. Extending hospitality is also meeting needs, the need we all have for a community where we are each called by our name. How are we at welcoming people for who they are, and not just as potential pledging units?

“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. “

You may have noticed that I skipped a line, but I’ll get back to it. One part of living together as a real parish, an extended family, is that we know each other and that we celebrate important moments in life together. When my wife Melinda died last February, this parish wept with me, and I will never forget the outpouring of love and care that I received from you. So I know you’re good at weeping together, and how about rejoicing together? My experience is that parishes are not quite as good at rejoicing with each other. Even though it’s more fun! How is Emmanuel with this? (We certainly did well yesterday!)

“Associate with the lowly” is part of living in harmony: everyone matters, no exceptions. None of us is better in God’s eyes than another, even though we humans love to make false distinctions of value. And that leads to pride and haughtiness, which are the antithesis of love. They lead to hypocrisy, which is spiritual death. If it’s not about love, it’s not about God, and in the long run, if it’s not about God, it’s about death.

And finally, the hardest part: how are we at loving our enemies? Blessing those who persecute us? How do we “take thought for what is noble in the sight of all”, when terrorists convinced they are doing God’s will are driving cars and trucks over the bodies of children? Well, I don’t know of a magic formula to make us love people who hate us. But elsewhere in Romans, Paul points out that when we were still his enemies, Christ died for us. It can only be at the foot of the cross that we can meet our enemies without wanting to destroy them. In other words, we need to develop the habit of seeing enemies as God sees them, and try to work for what is best for them, and us.

“If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” We have to defend ourselves, it is true. But even the French Foreign Legion, one of the toughest military units in the world, requires new recruits to swear that they will not hate a defeated enemy. That’s a start.

So in Paul’s last line, we return to the beginning of this inquiry into our common life at Emmanuel.

“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” We can’t do that alone, but together we have the strength of Christ, of his Body, who we are together. And in the end, nothing can overcome that strength. But in the meantime, we have work to do, do we not?

May God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, bless you together with Michael, today, tomorrow, and always.