

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ!

It seemed like my grandma was waiting for her sons and her daughters to visit her one last time before she died. Two of her sons, my dad and his oldest brother had drives of several hundred miles to get to the hospital where she was suffering from pneumonia at 93 years old and wouldn't be leaving the hospital alive.

Mom and dad got there before she died. Grandma was of course happy to see dad, but when she saw my mom, she exclaimed "Millie, you came!" This took place over twenty years ago, Cynthia and I had lived in California for some time, and before that in New Jersey and Wisconsin so apparently I was out of the loop on some family drama, if indeed there had been any. When mom told me about grandma's reaction to seeing her, I asked if there had been a problem of some sort. Apparently there hadn't been but outside of dad visiting Bemidji with my baby brother, the family hadn't been up there for years. Dad's brother got to the hospital in time to see grandma, and not too long after that she died.

There wasn't any unfinished family business to settle, no particular need for reconciliation, but there was obvious love and affection between grandma and her family, and especially between grandma and my mom. Now interestingly enough no one had stopped to pray, not out loud anyway, there was no hospital room service with a pastor or chaplain and Jesus' name wasn't invoked. But grandma was at peace when she died and from what mom described to me a couple days later, God was present. Grandma and all the Bemidji family had been faithful members of first Lutheran in Bemidji for decades if not their entire lives, and grandma died as she had lived, full of faith and hope. Mom and dad had been members there until they moved to Austin where they joined St. Olaf and were faithful members there.

I mention all this because in the hospital room in Bemidji, some of the faithful were gathered, as has been the case throughout time and space. There was love, community, family and faith and the past moved into the future. Jesus in our gospel reading talks about a community that was yet to come, a community that wouldn't really develop until after the resurrection and Pentecost.

Now I had inquired of mom as to whether there had been conflict because there is conflict in virtually every community, people who are together for any length of time, whether in family, the church or any other gathering of people will sooner or later have disagreements, there will be wrongs to be corrected, hurts that need healing. These things happen, even in communities of believers, family, the local congregation, the worldwide church. Communities of believers experience loss and they experience the presence of Christ.

Jesus bodily absent, but somehow present all the same. We gather around him at our services, in worship and in fellowship. And we have a mission, Jesus' mission, the mission of sharing the Good News, sharing the love of God with all, outcast and marginalized as well as brothers and sisters in Christ.

And it is love, not law that is the sign of our community gathering together even as love and Christ's commandments are active and present as they are here this morning. We, together with the greater church, struggle to grow into the "Body of Christ" in this time and place. Our gospel this morning isn't about dealing with the people we consider to be disruptive problems in our lives, and we cannot look at it that way. Of course we are to challenge disruption and destruction in our communities but not in demonizing others. There is to be a process of reconciliation whether we like it or not. Truthfully there are some who will not respond, they are to be treated as "a Gentile and a tax-collector."

But remember! Jesus ate with tax-collectors and a number of times marveled at the faith of Gentiles, e.g., the Centurion, the Syro-Phoenician woman, the Samaritan leper. The writer of this gospel today was a former tax-collector. So what we hear today is that we are not to write these people off, but pay particular need to their need, to reconciliation. We challenge disruptive actions but we still want them in our family of faith. It's not easy, but since when has following Jesus been easy?

When we gather in Jesus' name, we do our best to do whatever needs doing as Jesus would have done it, hence the need on our part for constant study and increased understanding of scripture. Faith in Jesus means trusting Jesus and his way as being for us even when the world laughs. It means knowing that we are to reach out to the marginalized, the alien in our midst, the outcasts and those looked down upon by our society, that is our world. Forgiveness is the first option for us because we are forgiven. As we walk with Jesus, we realize we are becoming more and more as he would have us be.

But in the end, in grandma's hospital room, in the surgery the next day where my dad died, in the waiting room where my mom waited with one of my aunts, at home in California where I waited for the word that I hoped would not come, in the end we have a promise of comfort and hope for all the challenges we encounter, for our God promises to be with us always. We are not abandoned, nor are we orphans, we belong to God who called us before we were born. We have the promise of love that is more powerful than fear, and with faith and hope we face the unknown future with uncommon courage and grace, we are never alone!

AMEN