**13 Pentecost, Sept. 7, 2014, Exodus 12: 1-14; Ps 149; Romans 13:8-14; Matt 18:15-20; Rev Mary S. Trainor**

Two stories from my recent vacation out west: (1)While hiking, I chatted with a woman who lives in Florida but spends much of the summer camping in Montana with her husband. One of the things she talked about was life in Florida. She said that no matter how old she is, she will always live in a single family house and never buy into a condo. I asked her why, and she said "**condos are too difficult -- condo associations are racked with people who have difficulty getting along."** Her response made me ponder. After all, condos are just a cross section of people in society.... so the issue really is that people have difficulty getting along with each other.

(2) It was quiet in the Yellowstone National Park campground. Oh the campground was full, but people were quietly going about their evening camping rituals. Our tent and sleeping bags were all set up. Jim and I enjoyed our time at the picnic table cooking our dinner over our Coleman stove. After dinner, we made a campfire and sat in our chairs to enjoy the quiet of the wilderness evening. Then, around 8 PM, several cars pulled into two adjacent campsites. They brought out noisy equipment, and proceeded to have themselves a party and a volleyball game. Our quiet evening in the woods was disrupted. Quiet hours in the campground are between 10 PM and 6 AM, and so we had at least two hours left before we could rely on the Campground Host to intervene. What were we to do? As we sat by the campfire, we considered various choices of how to react to this unwelcome change. What would you have done?

Today's scripture theme is about how we behave towards one another, how we get along with each other. In our Romans reading, St Paul said, "***love your neighbor as yourself***." We are to show God's love to others, avoid "***quarreling and jealousy"*** and "***...lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light...put*** ***on the Lord Jesus Christ***. " Oh my, what a challenge! What does it even mean to put on the Lord Jesus - especially in the midst of situations where we are dealing with difficult people? We aren't always going to get along - and Jesus knows this. How do we do this?

In our Gospel today, Jesus speaks of what we are to do in church when one of us "***sins against you***" -- in other words, really messes up and hurts others. Conflict affects the whole community, as we are knit together in Christ. So, He teaches us what to do if controversy arises. The good news is that we are neither to sweep it under the rug nor are we to yell at each other! Whew! Neither of those options are attractive. Instead, we are to have a reconciling, humble, gentle spirit. We are to meet with each other and work it out slowly with patience and forgiveness. We live in a polarized society, yet as Christians we are to peacefully work it out together. Oh, we all won't get what we want -- but there is listening and learning from each other, there is compromise, there are multiple solutions, there is forgiveness....through God's love. Jesus puts it this way, "***where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them***." We have Jesus with us when we are getting along, and when we are in disagreement. So, if we "***put on Jesus...the armor of light***" we can proceed with Jesus strengthening us in the midst of situations when our patience is tried. This works because of what God has done for us through Jesus Christ our Savior. We live in the reality of genuine transformation. Jesus, redeemer and sanctifier, is right here, next to us. Because of Jesus, we can turn from our self-absorbed state and become people who care for others - out there, and here -- in a radical way.

Our English language has only one word for love, but the Greek language of the New Testament has several words for love. The type of love that Jesus is speaking of here is "**agape**" love. Agape love is not brotherly love or close friendship love or romantic love -- agape love is about God's love expressed through us. In agape love, the love of God and the love of our neighbor is inseparable. ***God is love*** (1 John 4:8) and God's love is most clearly experienced through the cross; we are recipients of that love. Showing agape love is not about feeling, but is an act of our will. When we love others with agape love, we have made a decision (with Jesus help and strength). Because of God’s love toward us, we are able to love one another: listening when we don't feel like it, showing patience when we have none, learning from each other through our stubbornness.  
  
So, what happened in the Yellowstone National Park campground that night? Actually, nothing visible happened. Jim and I prayed, chilled out, and were able to see the importance of the fun that this group were having. Jesus was in a third camp chair, right there, giving us patience, helping us to put things in perspective. Instead of getting all upset, Jesus' presence allowed us to tune them out and roast our marshmallows. Oh, we ended up going to sleep later then we were planning on, but that was ok. And, when we did go to sleep we put in our earplugs and happily nodded off in our sleeping bags Because we put on Jesus, we found the patience to not let the noisy neighbors bother us. Jesus allowed us to see things not from our narrow perspective, but from His larger, heavenly perspective.

It matters how we treat each other, whether they are people we know or not, whether we are seen or heard by others or not. As Jesus said, "***whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven***." Loving thy neighbor is not easy, but it is a vital part of being a Christian. It is too difficult to do on our own, but we can decide to rely on God for the strength to do what we need to do. Jesus is right there with us wherever we are in that camp chair, giving us a new, divine perspective so we can deal with each other as He would have us do.

How is God calling you to show His love to others? Whether it be your next door neighbor or a friend or a family member or someone you see in the grocery store or someone you have had a disagreement with -- you can assume that no one has have enough love shown to them, and they need to experience agape love through you. People are lonely, alienated. A week from today, you can show God's love to a neighbor, acquaintance, friend, family member by inviting them here to our outdoor mass at 9:30, our tailgate party at 10:45, and/or our blessing of the animals at 1:30. These events are held out of doors because, for some people, coming into a church is difficult. Here at St. John's is a place they can experience God's love--through all of us. Who will you invite to come with you next week? Who will you bring? You can make a difference. Amen.