

16th Week after Pentecost, Proper 17 – Year A – August 30, 2008
Exodus 3:1-15; Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28
Susan E. Wilmot

There are some stories we hear that are literally life changing. The stories that emerged from the September 11 terrorist attacks or the aftermath of hurricane Katrina changed many people's lives. Perhaps it was a story like the first moon landing and the grainy words of Neil Armstrong that inspired you. Was your life changed when you first heard or read Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech? Or then again, maybe it was a more personal story – a family story that has always made you laugh or cry – but has become an inspiration for you in some way. Biblical stories are also inspirational. There are many stories of love, of hope, or of faith that resonate deep in our souls. I know that is true of me. Yet today, as we consider the almost proverbial or Wisdom-like advice in the reading from Paul's letter to the Church in Rome, I have another story to share. It was a gift in my faith journey, and is now woven as a thread of hope in my life story. Ultimately, it is a story of how God's love works in each of us.

The phone blares in the darkness in frantic fire engine red. The woman is catapulted from the depths of sleep to instant alarm. As is so often the case with a late night call this is not good news. "Mom, I'm in trouble," says the tremulous voice. How many of us have had a similar call and felt that stewpot of bubbling emotions? Feelings of shock, fear or dread, mixed with the strong desire to help, somehow all bound together with an outpouring of God's compassion filling us and helping us to answer the call.

Last week we heard God's call for life in community according to the Gospel. This week's reading from Paul's letter to the Church continues with more of a 'how to' list of practical words and deeds that reflect God's love, and are signs of God's transforming power in our lives. "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." Since God is love, the foundation of all things throughout God's creation is love. Paul also begins with love here. Offering examples of how we show genuine unconditional love in our lives. Paul is not talking about love as a feeling or an emotional response. He is talking about love as an intention of our hearts and a mindset manifested in acts of kindness and goodness. This type of love is the same as God's desire for your life and mine. God always gives us what is best for us. That is the love we are called to imitate – a selfless giving for the good of the other. In practice, this looks like caring about others and caring for others by meeting their needs without thought of anything owed in return. Paul goes on to tell us that hospitality is another important way we show God's love in our lives. Hospitality is one of the great gifts of this community, a shining light of God's love and graciousness and one of the many things we have to celebrate about our common life together.

God is pure and perfect goodness, and so we too reflect God's goodness through in our abhorrence of evil. Practically it means trying to put an end to evil deeds, whilst always having Godly compassion on those who have fallen into evil. There is no limit to God's yearning for every soul to be reconciled to Him. The Word speaks of how to overcome evil. Evil will always feed on evil, so the only way to overcome it is by breaking cycles of violence and vengeance. In our humanity, history has shown repeatedly that we are not able to do this in and of ourselves. But as we affirm in our Baptismal covenant, "I will with God's help." And it is only by the power of the Holy Spirit that we have the strength to resist evil and stand firm as mirrors of God's love. Loving the doer of evil does not mean that we dole out cheap grace or platitudes to make others feel better. Holding one another and all people accountable for their misdeeds is the loving response. Leading others to true repentance is the loving response. Responding to violence with violence is not a loving response.

Trouble has come calling in all our lives at some time or another. Often most unexpectedly. On that dark night, the mother in our story is praying silently as she dresses. Before setting out to be with her daughter, she goes to the kitchen and gathers three small pans, two potatoes, a couple of eggs, and a handful of coffee beans. The roads are strangely deserted at that advanced hour. The gray and indigo

haze looks bruised in the yellow-white beam of her car's headlights. Traffic lights wink knowingly, seeing much in their silent vigil.

In a trinity of exhortations, Paul shares the depths of faith that accompany life in the Christian community. "Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord." There is no splicing of God's unity in Trinity revealed to us, in us, and through us in the world. In perfect integrity, our faith is a gift from God, kindled by our love for Jesus, in the power of the Holy Spirit. The community of the faithful is passionate, eager and ardent as we live boldly into our transformed lives as members of Christ's body. Remember that "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). One of the other great gifts of this community is knowing and feeling the presence of the Holy Spirit moving in this place, guiding us forward with confidence and joy in our service to the Lord.

Love. Faith. Now Paul offers the hope that is God's gift to all believers through the resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It may be the end of August, but every single day our lives are inextricably bound to the glorious message of Easter. Hope. Where else would we find the strength and courage to continue working for good? Sometimes the world just seems to be a crushing weight of pain, despair and dis-ease, quite contrary to kingdom of God wherein dwells love and comfort, peace, hope and healing. In practice, you and I can always find ourselves in God's kingdom, through prayer. Surrounded by God's love, filled with the Holy Spirit, there is always hope. However deep the chasm of despair is, however wide the valley of pain has spread, however high the walls of dis-ease seem to be, prayer is a bridge and a lifeline to God.

There are breath-stealing hugs, streams of tears, and a blue cloud of despair as mother and daughter face each other across the doorway. On one side, there is darkness like midnight blue, streaked with jagged lines of black and red, despite the lamp's glow. On the other side of the threshold, there is hope, infinitely brighter than sun, moon or stars. The young woman realizes that there is something clanking and looks curiously at her mother. There is no need for words. The silence is already filled with clamoring pain and need. The woman proceeds to fill each pot with water, placing the eggs carefully in the first, the coffee beans in another, and slices of potato in the last. Twenty minutes later, taking each pan in turn, she explains the strange nocturnal feast to her daughter. The potatoes that were hard and fibrous when they went into the water, are now a mushy mess. The eggs were hard on the outside and soft in the middle, but the boiling water has done its work turning them hard to the core and poisoned by sulfurous deposits. Finally, there are the coffee beans. They were firm, richly colored and aromatic before they were dropped into the scalding water. Now the beans remain just as strong, colorful and delightful to smell, but the water has also turned the same dark brown, and become wonderfully fragrant.

You and I can respond these three ways to the reality of life in and beyond this community. By our own strength, we may well seem pretty tough like the potatoes, but a little hot water can turn us to a mess of pulpy despair. By our own strength, we may well be thinking we're pretty good eggs all around, with hearts that are protected by shells. Yet evil can harden our hearts and poison our relationships if we do not hold fast to the love and goodness of God. Then there is the coffee bean. Faithful hearts turn first to God's love, are filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, and maintain a lifeline of prayer and hope in Christ Jesus. The coffee beans give of themselves, and in doing so transform the surrounding turmoil of water into delicious hot coffee. As God's faithful children, you and I are like the coffee beans, called to be agents of God's transforming love wherever we find ourselves. So today let us celebrate one another and our life in this community. Who we are, who you are, and all that we do in service to God, makes a difference in many lives. What a gift. What a blessing. Praise God!

Amen.