Just One Shade of Grey
A Sermon on Romans 14 by the Rev. Philip Major
St. Paul’s Episcopal Church ~ Syracuse, NY ~ September 17, 2017

What do you get when you cross a Unitarian with a Jehovah’s Witness? Someone who wanders through the neighborhood knocking on people’s doors, but when people open the door they have no idea what to say. I tell this joke with no animosity toward Unitarians or Jehovah’s Witnesses; I have good friends who are Unitarians and I have known many very fine people who are Jehovah’s Witnesses. In fact I am sure there is a similar joke involving Episcopalians because Episcopalians are not known for knocking the doors down when it comes to inviting friends and neighbors to join them in worship.

So I start this sermon with a challenge for you: I encourage you to invite your friends and neighbors to join us for worship. I encourage you to do this because St. Paul’s Church is a very good place.

What is it that makes this place unique? What is it that makes this group of people so good and powerful? It is something that is strong enough to sustain us through the most difficult times. It is the power of love. If we are going to understand what makes this community of love so powerful, we must understand what we are not.

We are not a community that devotes its time and energy to violence. We do not promote hatred or even anger. All of that is obvious to us. What is often not obvious is that, as people who proclaim the power of love, we cannot afford to spend our time and energy on the work of judgment.

There are some parts of life where meaning and value come in a range of possibilities. Take exercise for example. Exercise is not an all or nothing proposition. But there is one part of life that is a clear yes or no decision. It is the part that has to do with love.

When I was studying to become a priest I read hundreds of books. The most important of these books, aside from the Holy Scriptures, is a collection of essays by Dietrich Bonhoeffer called ‘Ethics’. In the first of these essays Bonhoeffer talks about the part of life that is a yes or no decision.

Bonhoeffer’s message is that there is one main decision about how we will spend our lives. We can either devote our energies to the works of love or we can devote our energies to the works of judgment. We cannot do both. As soon as we begin to do the work of love, we stop doing the work of judgment. As soon as we begin to judge, the love in our hearts begins to disappear. We must choose one or the other.

According to Bonhoeffer, all of the works of love are based in our union with God. If you spend your days planting and harvesting vegetables and if the work of farming is a work of love for you then you do this work as one who is united with God’s creation. If you help children or adults with love in your heart, you do this work as a person who is united with God, because you see the people you care for as God’s children. If you work for peace and justice for all people and you do this work with love in your heart, you work as one who is united with God.

As soon as we begin to judge we cease to do the work of love. This is very difficult for us to accept. We really think we can do both. It is good to have some idea of what is right and what is wrong. But when we are completely confident in our judgments and begin to act on those judgments we stop doing the work of love.

I remember the day I first read these words from Bonhoeffer. I stopped short in the middle of the paragraph and read it again. It was as if someone had said to me, “there is just one shade of grey.” I did not understand it. I argued with Mr. Bonhoeffer in my head. Then I remembered his words for the next two or three years and I watched what was happening in my life. Eventually I
realized he is right. We think these two can coexist – the work of loving and the work of judging. They cannot.

According to Bonhoeffer, all of the works of judgment are rooted in separation from God. This is easy to see when we think about extreme forms of judgment. Capital punishment is one of the extreme forms of judgment. Each month 2 or 3 prisoners are executed for their crimes in the United States.

For me, the issue of capital punishment is a spiritual question. Whenever we execute a murderer we are taking on a sort of judgment that does not belong to us. God did not create us for this purpose, for the work of killing others. If someone is guilty of a terrible crime lock them away in jail where they will not hurt others, but leave the ultimate judgment to the one who created them. This is the point of our Gospel for today and of our passage from Paul’s letter to the Romans. Paul asks the Romans, Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. When we devote ourselves to the work of love we accept that God will be the ultimate judge.

The work of loving and the work of judging cannot coexist. But don’t take it from me. Take it from people who have had to face this decision in the most terrible way. Some of us are old enough to remember the bombing of the airplane over Lockerbie, Scotland in 1988. In the years that followed, the relatives of the people who died had to make a decision about whether they would spend the rest of their lives doing the work of judgment or doing the work of love.

I listened to their descriptions of their experiences soon after the 9/11 attacks, 16 years ago. 16 years ago the Lockerbie survivors gave some gentle words of advice to all who had lost friends or family members in the terrorist attacks. They observed that the two main responses to this sort of violence are grief and anger. The grief is rooted in love for one who has died, but the rage is rooted in judgment. The relatives of the victims of the Lockerbie bombing discovered that it is necessary to leave behind the anger, to leave behind the judgment, in order to return to the life of love they had enjoyed before their family members were killed. They realized they could not do both things, and that at some point they would have to stop being angry, so they could begin to love again.

Most of us have not had to make this sort of decision under such difficult circumstances. Most of us have not had to face the sort of rage that could take over our entire lives. But all of us must make this decision every day. We must constantly choose whether we will spend our energy on love or whether we will spend it on judgment.

Our lives are full of little moments when we must choose one or the other. There are at least 10 or 20 moments in any given day when I face the decision: will I love or will I judge? Especially when I am driving my car or when I am waiting in line in the store, I do not always choose the best thing. When the person driving next to me suddenly pulls into the very small space between my car and the car in front of me, I usually do not feel love in my heart for this person. Sometimes I have even been known to give little hand signals which are not recognized as universal gestures of kindness by most people.

In most cases, when I feel or express judgment toward someone else, the other person does not even notice. I do not respond with violence or criminal actions. But that does not actually make much difference because my goal is to be in union with God. My goal is to live a life of love. And as soon as I begin to become enraged, as soon as I begin to judge others, even in small ways, I turn away from the work of love.

This is why St. Paul’s is such an important, powerful place. It takes a lot of practice to constantly choose to love and to leave the judging up to a spirit that is much greater, stronger and steadier than my spirit. St. Paul’s is the place where we practice the work of love. Let us rejoice and be glad for this.