

St. Paul's Congregational Church, May 21, 2017
 Witness of Love, Easter 6A
 John 14:15-21, Acts 17: 22-31
 Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

There are stirrings of new life here at St. Paul's – and not just from the squirrels in the tower! By the way, they'll soon be off to a new home thanks to Have-A-Heart traps brought by our Administrative Assistant Lori's husband. Next challenge is to seal their entrance once and for all!

Last week we, along with the disciples, asked the question, “What will become of us?” And we heard Jesus' promise to his disciples that they will do even greater works than he! Jesus empowered them, empowers us, to do that! And it's starting here! Also, there was the assignment I put before you: to ponder the question: if this church disappeared from this town today, would anybody note the difference?

I did hear from some of you – and I also saw you respond! God is doing ever greater works through not-so-great, ordinary people like us. Let's keep those conversations and ideas coming! There's a new excitement beginning to surface here and that's wonderful.

Today, two weeks before the celebration of Pentecost we read in the gospel of John the promise of the Spirit to come. Jesus tells his disciples, tells us, I'm going away but I won't leave you alone, I won't leave you orphaned.

We're listening in again today on the farewell conversation Jesus has with his so very anxious disciples who are needing reassurance and hope– just as we are these days. What does Jesus tell them to do? He simply tells them to keep his commandments. We all know what those are. What mattered first and foremost to Jesus was love, and it's no surprise that “love” is in the very same sentence with “obey my commandments.” Let's remember, too, that Jesus expanded our understanding of the commandments to include things like forgiveness, praying for our enemies, caring about the poor and the marginalized, and ordering our lives well. Jesus' command to love one another is the crux of his teachings, isn't it. And, isn't that the same challenge given to us in community that continues today – right now, right here in our life together as church?

What does obedience to this commandment to love look like both in our individual and congregational faith journeys today? Would anyone be able to pick us out of a crowd as followers of Jesus because of our love? This is about more than individual acts – it's about an extraordinary way of life – Dianne Bergant writes, “If we live and love as Jesus did, we will live with gentleness and reverence. The love that comes to us through the Spirit will overflow into the lives of others. We will be agents of God's love in the world – our lives will be evidence of the presence of the Spirit in our midst. Agents of God's love – isn't that a wonderful phrase? It's so active – so inspiring for everyday life. That's the challenge laid out to us – both as individuals and as church. St. Paul's Church – agents of God's love – now, there's an awesome mission statement.

Mother Teresa wrote, “There is a light in this world, a healing spirit more powerful than any darkness we may encounter. We sometimes lose sight of this force

when there is suffering, too much pain. Then suddenly, the Spirit will emerge through the lives of ordinary people who hear a call and answer in extraordinary ways.”

That light, that power, that presence, that comfort is with us forever. How do we live as though we believe that! How do we live that out? Do we hear that call? And I truly believe God calls all of us – each and every one of us – do we listen and respond? Ordinary people can and will do extraordinary things.

Every once in a while I’m so inspired by the grace of God when I least expect it – when I cross paths with someone who lives out God’s call in an unexpected way. This can happen to any of us – if we pay attention.

84 year old David Toma is one of those people. Maybe you recognize that name –I didn’t right away. He grew up here in New Jersey – born the youngest of 12 children in back in 1933. As a child he would accompany his mother who was a missionary to prisons where she would pray for the inmates and offer compassion and caring words for those with troubled lives.

David went on to join the Marines in 1953, signed on to a minor league baseball contract on his discharge, got married, started a family, and in 1956 joined the Newark police department where he later became a detective on the vice, narcotic, and gambling squad where he experienced first hand the great struggle so many people faced with addictions to drugs and alcohol. And he began to feel a burning desire to do something about it as he saw thousands of people whose lives were being destroyed.

He studied everything he could about the effects of narcotics and alcohol and combined it with what he learned in the streets as an undercover detective. As early as in the mid 1950s he began speaking to groups about what he had learned – an outspoken crusader against drug and alcohol abuse. But around the same time his five year old son died tragically and unexpectedly – this threw him into a deep state of depression and led to his own battle with addiction to prescription medication. He was, though, able to turn his struggle around and harness his tragedy for - his words - for further use of his God given talent for helping people.

The ABC television network developed and aired a TV series based on his life – the original series was called “Toma” but only ran for one season. The next season it returned as the series called “Baretta” – and ran for six seasons.

David retired from the Newark police department and began lecturing all over the country in the mid-1970s. His style of lecturing would grip audiences from the moment he started to talk – he shared the countless experiences of the devastation that drugs and alcohol would cause to individuals and families around the world. He has reached millions with his message.

Back in 2014 David Toma came to Glen Ridge to speak at an all-school assembly at the High School. The night before his presentation I was invited to be part of a small group made up of school officials, police officers, student council members, town officials, representatives of the Ambulance squad and parents. We came together to meet him and hopefully give him some of our thoughts before he spoke with the students.

Some of what he said was terribly difficult to hear – he wasn’t always easy to listen to. But as I really listened to him tell his story and respond to our comments, I suddenly realized that he was making a powerful testimony: he was talking about love – about loving our neighbors as a motivation for what he does – and, even more striking, he

began using the language of call – I’ve come to understand God’s call as something you can’t NOT do. And that’s exactly what he said – an incredibly powerful moment for me.

He’s been asked, “Where do you get the power and energy to deal with these emotional situations day in and day out?” His answer, “If you want to change your life, you need God in your life! God will give you all the power you will ever need to deal with any situation!”

He goes on, “I was given a gift by God, and I’ve been blessed to spend my life using that gift to serve God by making a difference in the lives of others. Every one of us was created for a purpose and God doesn’t make any mistakes. The greatest thing we can achieve in our life is to discover that gift, and that purpose, and then to spend our life fulfilling it.”

And there is a testimony that shows the extraordinary gift he gave one of the students at one of his lectures. This student reports, “I never knew up to that point what it felt like to have someone say and show me that they loved me. You did, and you didn’t even know me!

Mr. Toma told us that after he makes his presentation to students – and that presentation can last for a long time! – he makes himself available to talk with them either in groups or individually. His presentations are that powerful! And his time in Glen Ridge was no different – I understand about 50 students took that opportunity to meet with him after his lecture.

Here’s an ordinary man who’s really anything but ordinary – doing extraordinary things – grounded in the love of God, following the example of Jesus Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit – making a difference in the lives of individuals, making a difference in the life of the community. And furthermore, using the language of call, the language of love, to talk about the “whys” of his doing and very being.

Now, this is not a soft, sentimental feeling of love – anything but that – it’s a love that holds each other accountable. It’s a love that challenges us to use our God given talents to be the best we can be, to help others be the best they can be. It’s a love that cares for others as we care for ourselves. This is hard – it can be very difficult, costly, demanding, draining, overwhelming.

This love calls us to stop and see, stop and think, and it calls us to action: if we really believe that we are bound together as brothers and sisters in Christ, then as long as one of our brothers and sisters is hungry, cold, naked so are we. As long as one of our brothers and sisters lives in fear, under stifling oppression, under the demon of addiction, so do we. This love is demanding. This love can be difficult. This love can cost us. And it sure can be overwhelming when we look around us at the needs that just don’t quit.

But that’s the thing about being called: we’re not left to ourselves. God is with us, right next to us. Jesus calls us to be where he is. Jesus calls us to abide in his love. Love that is so much more than a feeling – love as an action - the response to his command. We love because God loves us – loves us enough to send his Son so we might live. And God will go to any lengths to help us.

Let’s stop and celebrate that! Let’s stop and abide in that! Let’s turn and love God first. Let’s love one another for it is in loving one another that we will meet God and find the wholeness, the healing, that God wants for each of us. God will show us the

way: through the people with whom we share our lives, those who cross paths with us, for our beloved church.

Let's keep those creative ideas coming – let's each do our part in sharing those ideas. Some will cost us money! Some will cost us time! But becoming agents of God's love is worth that and more! Let's take some risks. We have much to offer each other, our community, indeed the world.

And let's be sure in our knowledge that God will be with us always, giving us the strength to love, the strength to serve. We can do this! We can do this together! So may it be. Amen.