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The Practice of Love

John 14:15

On a recent trip Barbara and I spent four days at a Bed and Breakfast near Lancaster, South Carolina. We chose this particular establishment because its web site indicated that it was located on land acquired in 1780 by the Craig family which had come to America with some of my Huey ancestors, sailing on the Lord Dunluce in 1772. The decision to stay in this Bed and Breakfast was rewarded in several ways. It turned out that this farm is still in the hands of the Craig family. They have a small table which came with the family on the boat from Ireland. The proprietor of the B & B arranged for me to see and photograph the table. That's what I call superior hospitality.

But the hospitality did not end there. The proprietor was a man named Johannes Tromp who was born in the Netherlands, was trained as a chef, and managed one of the finest restaurants in New York City for many years. He purchased an 1828 mansion in Lancaster and had it moved to an idyllic location on the Craig farm just outside of town. He restored it and filled it with his magnificent collection of antiques and period art. He created beautiful gardens and cut hiking trails through the woods.

For four days we pretty much had the house to ourselves as we enjoyed the gourmet breakfast he prepared every morning. We saw no evidence that this business was a big moneymaker but it is clear that Johannes finds great joy in what he is doing. Hospitality is at the heart of who he is. It is also clear that Johannes' purpose is not just to restore a house but also to restore the spirits of those who stay there. He said to us, "This place is like heaven for me and I love to share it with others." The work that Johannes does can be understood as the practice of love.

In the 17th chapter of the Book of Acts Paul is speaking to a people who do not understand the practice of love. They are searching for the love and wholeness which eludes them. This happens to be a gathering of intellectuals in Athens. Paul recognizes that for these Athenians religion is just a vague notion that lacks clarity and substance. Paul sees this in their idol to the unknown god.

Paul is convinced that this unnamed idol points to a generic form of religion which can offer no clear direction and no real hope. So Paul sets out to identify the unknown god. He points to the resurrected Christ who is the sign of God's transformative love. God has an identity and it is self-giving love. This is the answer to their deep craving for acceptance and wholeness. But the Athenians will not listen.

The nature of their response has been expressed by the comedian David Brenner. He remembers a strange inconsistency in the old Superman television series. Travel back in your mind and picture the scene of Superman confronting one of the bad guys in one of those television episodes. The bad guy fires at Superman with a gun. What does Superman do? Superman naturally would smirk and throw his chest out. The bullets would bounce harmlessly away.

But do you remember what often happened next? The bad guy would run out of bullets and throw his gun at Superman. And what would Superman do then? He would duck. It is kind of strange when you think about it. Bullets bounce off of him, but when a gun is thrown at him he ducks. This is what the Athenians do when Paul offers to them the identity of the unknown god whom they have been seeking all their lives. When they hear that the nature of God is self-giving love they duck. They would rather cling to their impotent generic religion than to come to terms with the transformative power of God's love.

The gospel writer makes a similar point in the 14th chapter of John. Jesus is speaking to the disciples after they have broken bread together at the Last Supper. It is a farewell sermon in which Jesus is preparing the disciples for the challenges they will face after he is gone. A generic religion will not be enough for them to meet those challenges. We read that the church has been given much more than that. By the power of God's love the church receives the gift of a very specific identity. This is a truth which they cannot duck.

John describes God's love as both a gift and a mandate. God's love is the gift which sustains this fledgling church as it struggles with the feeling of abandonment that comes with Jesus' departure. But this same love defines the church's agenda as well. For the practice of active love is the work to which the church is called.

This is the message that lies at the heart of baptism. The sacrament celebrates the love of God which claims us from the beginning of our lives. But it also reminds us that our vocation is to practice that love. The practice of active love is our witness to the presence of God in the world. The practice of active love is our response to the God who guides and saves.

Jesus invites us to receive this gift and offer it to others. The piece of heaven that comes to us is meant to be shared. Johannes Tromp told us how his piece of heaven came to him and why he needs to share it. When he learned that one of the the historic treasures of Lancaster was going to be razed to make way for a new drugstore in the center of town, he made the impulsive decision to purchase it. He then gave up his position with the restaurant in New York City so he could devote full time to restoring the home and experiencing his piece of heaven. The restaurant he was managing was called "Windows on the World." It was located at the top of the World Trade Center, where three years later hundreds of his friends and co-workers perished.

Johannes pointed out that he was always at work at the time when the planes hit the towers. He could not have survived that attack. He said, "When people praise me for saving this house I tell them that is not the whole story. The truth is this house saved me. I think this is what you Presbyterians call providence."

We, too, can celebrate God's guiding providence and saving presence. We do that by learning the practice of love.