

The Reverend Kathleen Killian
Proper 17A

Who are you?

As people of God, we are called to authenticity—to genuinely be who we are. In echo of God’s words to Moses, we are who we are. But exactly who is that? Who or what defines us? our parents? friends? work? the news? our desire for relevance and success within the mainstream?

We are molded to some degree by many influences, but as the ecclesia or church, we are a community called out of the world—and back into it, disciples set apart—for mission. Our mission—to be a community distinct from the world is inseparable from our identity as disciples of Christ. If you read the gospels, there is little doubt that Jesus meant for those who followed him to live a different way—to be in this world but not of it—to stand apart from the dominant world systems of power, privilege, oppression, and collusion—and for his “church,” his “body,” to be counter-cultural.

When Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, the early Christian communities were acutely aware of and struggled with their distinction from the world and Roman empire. I wonder: are we here today, the church, aware of our distinction as an alternative community? What does a way of “life that is lived differently through the power of the Spirit” actually look like?

In Paul’s letter, as applicable today and then, he gives us an idea as to how the church embodies itself as distinct community. Picking up from last week, our passage begins with love. Paul writes: *Let love be genuine*, or as the word in the Greek literally means, *un-hypocritical*. This verse could also be translated or understood as: Genuine love is or un-hypocritical love is, Paul’s long list of instructions and attributes to follow. Reframing some of the language (with some help from the Message Bible) and framing these in the form of questions, and our reflecting upon them, also gives us a pretty good idea about who we are genuinely meant to be.

As people of God and the church, do we:

Reject and shrink from evil, but embrace and hold fast to the good?

Are we affectionate friends who love one another?

Do we delight in honoring one another, are we even willing to play second fiddle?

Are we willing to work hard but also be enthusiastic and expectant in spirit, serving the Lord and rejoicing in hope?

Are we patient and persevering in suffering? Are we patient and persevering in prayer and praying?

Do we fellowship with the saints and those in need, extending hospitality to strangers, yet forgetting to do the same within our own community?

Do we bless those who persecute us? or do we curse them, at least initially?

Do we rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep, or go our own way, not in the mood to do either?

Are we lovers of harmony?

Are we proud or puffed up, pretending to know more than we do?

Are we friends with nobodies as well as somebodies?

Do we look to for revenge or to get even? Do we see the spark of divine beauty in everyone?

Do we have a peace ethic? Are we willing to do our best to live in peace, even with you-know-who?

Do we believe God is the judge, except in certain situations when we are?

Are we generous all the way round in body, mind, and spirit, and with everybody, even those we don't like, even our enemies?

Do we let evil and hatred get the best of us? Or do we get the best of being wronged by forgiving?

This is genuine love is radical love is our authenticity as followers of Christ.

And I hope you noticed, that this love, this different way, has little to nothing to do with buildings or budgets or outer change, and everything to do with inner change and transformation of consciousness?

Now, I can tell you that I didn't score a perfect 10 in answering these questions. And neither would have Paul. He struggled mightily, saying earlier in Romans: *I do what I don't want to do, and don't do what I want and know to do* (Romans 7:15-20). He also prayed fervently for a thorn in his side to be removed—and though it's not clear just what this thorn was—it would appear from his writings that it never was (2 Corinthians 12:8).

Br. Richard Rohr writes: *Both Jesus and Paul believed that necessary and predictable transgression—and the need for mercy that follows—is the pattern of transformation. This is the way God “justifies” . . . This is how God realigns reality inside the only absolute there is: the eternal love of God.*

Though we might, God does not expect us to play a perfect high scoring game or only make goals out there on the playing field of life. Life, as we each know, is neither perfect nor easy. But we are not to conform to this world—we are to deny the self that is fashioned or formed by the external and superficial—we are to be progressively changed by the renewing of our mind, that we may discern for ourselves the good will of God, the mind and heart of Christ in ours (Romans 12:2, Philippians 2:5, Ephesians 3:17).

As we move through the fall and into next year—during which St. John's will celebrate its 100th anniversary!—we must continue to discern and dialogue together about our identity and mission: who we are and what we are to do in service to Christ, stewarding our parish, partnership, each other, the wider community, our resources, our future, our conscience, and our consciousness.

As Jesus asks this morning, so must we: *what will it profit us if we gain the whole world—if we fix up or sell our buildings, balance the budget, and fill the bank account and pews—but forfeit our life . . . our life as a community that lives differently by the power of the Spirit, a cruciform community called not only to carry the cross but to carry out its message of the transforming power of love?*

Just as Jesus knew who he was, so must we know the reality of who we are in God, Christ indwelling our innermost being. As Paul writes, we are rooted deeply in love and founded securely on love (Ephesians 3:17), blessed with all spiritual blessings in Christ (Ephesians 1:3).

We all have inherent dignity and worth because we all are children of God (Romans 8:16)—and we know our final destiny—which is that *nothing* can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:35-39). These are our resources that are limitless, with which to make meaning and respond to the sense of abandonment, loneliness, and worthlessness that plagues so much of humankind.

These are the truths that define who we are: we are *who* we are, and we know *whose* we are: *I am who I am*, God said to Moses. *And I am here, now and forever.*