

Proper 17, Year A

Jeremiah 15:15-21

Psalm 26:1-8

Romans 12:9-21

Matthew 16:21-28

All summer long
we have been making our way
through Paul's Letter to the Romans,
asking one question:

**What does it mean
to be the Church together?**

How do we *welcome* one another,
belong to one another,
disagree with one another,
serve one another,
and do the good work God has given us to do . . .
together?

And today,
on the final Sunday of the series,
the apostle Paul gives us his answer.

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But before we get there,
there's something else we have to deal with,
a story of great national importance.

I am talking, of course,
about the death of Dolly Parton.

Like you, I too, grew up
within the Dolly zeitgeist.

Throughout my entire childhood
my mother had *Steel Magnolias* on the TV,
and throughout my entire adulthood
my wife has done the same with *9 to 5*.

Jay once raised a ton of money for mission
impersonating Dolly in a church talent show,
and she and I have raised our children
to celebrate Dolly's entire musical catalog.

And every Easter when I chant Eucharistic Prayer D—
the one with all the ups and downs—
choir member Brian Arsenault always says
it sounds like I'm about to bust into *Jolene*
because I am, after all, a country boy,
and even when I chant the Eucharist,
there's a country twang.

But I knew for sure
that Dolly's death had impacted us all
when I received an email this week
from a parishioner I never would have thought
was a Dolly devotee.

All it said was eight little words:

“Lonnie,
your sermon topic for Sunday—
Dolly Parton.”

* * *

But I want us to be careful here,
because you and I do not gather here on Sunday mornings
to lift up celebrities
or to extol the famous
and the beauty of the rich and famous.

No, we gather here together
to lift up our hearts
and to worship the Lord Jesus Christ
in the beauty of the Trinity.

And yet, all week long,
people from all walks of life
have been saying
there was something about Dolly—
something recognizable and unimpugnable—
something that had to do with her faith.

Even the atheists online this week have been saying,
“Listen, I've been an avowed atheist for decades,
but Dolly Parton is in heaven with Jesus now.
That's a fact, and I'll hear no arguments.”

So if we're going to talk about Dolly today,
that, I think,
is the interesting question:

What was it that people saw?

We Christians have a name for that . . .
that thing others see in us
that makes them think twice about faith
and the possibilities of God.
It's called "witness."

What was it that made other people
respond so sincerely
to Dolly's witness?

Sure,
there was the music.
The rhinestones.
The hair.
The humor and the charm.

But underneath all of that,
her faith had a shape.

You could see it
in what she did
with what she had.

She gave.

She gave books to children
because her own father could not read.

She gave money to families
who lost their homes in wildfires.

She funded scholarships
and education.

She gave to vaccine research.

When people were hurting,
again and again,
she used what she had
to *help*.

And y'all, as we wind down on Romans
and think about what it means
to be the Church together,
all of that

sounds a lot like the closing advice
that Paul gives us today.

And it all begins with one thing:
Let love be genuine.

The Greek word there is *anypokritos*:
an meaning “without”
and *ypokritos* meaning “hypocrisy.”

Love without hypocrisy.
Love that isn’t an act.
Love that isn’t performative.
Love that isn’t merely something
that Christians just talk about.
Love that takes shape.

And then Paul starts throwing verbs at us:

Love one another.
Honor one another.
Contribute to those in need.
Welcome strangers.
Rejoice with those who rejoice.
Weep with those who weep.
Live peaceably with all.
Feed your enemy.
Overcome evil with good.
Do something.

Because genuine Christian love
always takes a shape.

* * *

Now maybe you hear all that,
then think about Dolly Parton
and say,
“Well, sure.
She had millions of dollars to give away.
I’m just little old me.”

But notice that Paul does not say,
“Go start a foundation,” or
“Go give millions.”

He says:

Rejoice with somebody.
Weep with somebody.
Welcome somebody.
Feed somebody.
Bless somebody.
Honor somebody.
Make peace with somebody.

You have your attention.
Your time.
Your table.
Your patience.
Your forgiveness.
Your willingness to listen.
Your refusal to retaliate.
Your willingness to sit beside somebody who is hurting
when you cannot fix a blessed thing.

Paul is not asking you
to change the whole world.

He's asking what the love of Christ looks like
in the little piece of the world
entrusted to you.

And actually,
even that isn't quite right.

Because Paul isn't writing
to a collection of heroic individuals.

He is writing to a church.
To a body.
To people who belong to one another.

So maybe the Christian answer
to "Well, I'm just little old me,"
is:

No, you're not.
You're part of us.

One person visits.
One person cooks.
One person writes the note.
One person gives \$25 dollars.
One person gives \$25 hundred dollars.
One person teaches.

One person sits beside the person everybody else avoids.
One person forgives.
One person says, "I was wrong."
One person welcomes.
One person weeps.

And together . . .
that's the Church.

And maybe that's the answer
we've been looking for
all summer long.

**What does it mean
to be Church together?**

It means that the love of Christ
takes shape among us.

Not spectacularly.
Not perfectly.
Not with rhinestones and big hair.

But genuinely.

Because these are not instructions
for celebrities.

They are instructions
for the Church.

For us.

* * *

So, my friends,
after this long summer of asking,
"What does it mean
to be the Church together?"

when the world is hurting,
we give.

When someone rejoices,
we rejoice.

When someone weeps,
we weep.

When there is hatred,
we refuse to hate back.

And when the ugliness of the world
tempts us
to become ugly ourselves,
we are not overcome by evil.
We overcome evil with good.

Because, in the end,
we are not Dolly Parton.

We are the Body of Christ.

So let love be genuine.

Outdo one another
in showing honor.

Do not lag in zeal;
be ardent in spirit;
serve the Lord.

And in the words of an old pro
(who now sings before the throne of God,
presumably with guitar in hand)
tell the world as often as you can:

“I wish you joy,
and I wish you happiness.
But above all this,
I wish you love.”

Amen.