

Easter 7. 2018 (taken from earlier year but not to be found)

This past Thursday we celebrated the Lord's Ascension. St. Augustine who lived from 354 to 430 wrote this about the feast of the Ascension: "Why do we on earth not strive to find rest with Jesus in heaven even now, through the faith, hope and love that unite us to him? While in heaven he is also with us; and we while on earth are with him. He is here with us by his divinity, his power and his love. We cannot be in heaven, as he is on earth, by his divinity, but in him we can be there by love.

We may not get all the nuances of Augustine's complicated thought, but we get the general drift of his remarks. He is saying that even though Jesus has ascended into heaven he is still with us here on earth because of his divinity and power and love, and we can be with him even though he is in heaven and we are on earth through our faith, hope and love of him. So Augustine is putting heaven and earth together, and the binding material is love on both sides, Jesus' love for us and our love for him. So we can say that we are with him in heaven even now, and he is with us on earth even now.

A play on words and ideas, we might be tempted to say. But our second reading from John's First Letter makes the same point in different words. John says that anyone who remains in love remains in God and God in him. Therefore, we might try to say this message in our own words and say very simply: love erases the distance between heaven and earth. Love makes God present here, and if God is here, then heaven is here too.

Pope Francis has released a new letter on holiness or sanctity. He wants to teach us that becoming holy, becoming saints, is the work we are all called to do in and through the ordinary events of our daily lives. Listening to a neighbor, helping a person in the store—all such little, ordinary actions, he tells us, are the stuff of sanctity. For then we are living the commandment of love, and since God is love we are living in and with and through God. And that is holiness, that is sanctity.

You remember the song, "Love makes the world go round." If that is true, then it should be easy for us to live in the world because we too are attempting to live by the law of love. And yet that does not seem to be the case. Indeed we live in a society which though still religious in many ways seems to conflict with a life of love, at least as we religious people understand that word. "What is the loving

thing to do,” we ask ourselves when confronted with choices. Many times the answer we would give to a particular problem when applying this norm is very different from the answer that other people who are not religious would give to the same problem, even though they would claim to be using the same norm: the loving thing to do.

Some claim that society today has become so polarized that people on two different sides of a debate do not even consider the arguments which the other side offers and, more than that, are not even willing to admit that those of the other side are sincerely convinced of the goodness of their positions. This kind of polarization can exist inside the church as well. This is not a good situation. Perhaps the following things would help us to move beyond it.

First of all, we should presume that people who differ from us are well-intentioned. Like us, they are convinced of the rightness of their arguments and position. Therefore, we should begin with that as our premise. Secondly, we should entertain their positions by listening to them, by letting them come to word, by seeking to understand their positions. And, third, we should continue to respect them as persons even if, after listening to them, we still

think they are wrong. For they are more than their opinions. They are men and women whose lives go well beyond the present differences we have with them. We can and must respect them as human beings. We can separate them from the positions they take which we believe to be false and even harmful and which we will judge on their own merits, separate from those who hold them.

We are approaching our celebration of Pentecost, the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the early church. This is therefore a good time to ask for enlightenment as a church and in our society: enlightenment so that we may learn to live with each other in the church and with those in our society whose positions differ from our own. For even though we will celebrate Pentecost next Sunday, we know that since the first Pentecost the Holy Spirit has been inhabiting our world as the spirit of the risen Jesus. We live and move and breathe in a graced world. But because we do, because it is the air we breathe, we don't notice its graced quality. Let us ask the Lord to open our eyes, the eyes of our hearts, as we often pray, so that we may see the Lord Jesus present and working among us and in us and in everyone else on the face of the earth.

