

**Proper 19A (Pentecost 15)**  
**Sunday Said Mass at the High Altar**  
**by the Reverend James Ross Smith**  
**September 13, 2020**

*Romans 14:5–12; Psalm 103:8–13; Matthew 18:21–35*

On November 9, 1989, East Germans learned that they were free to cross the country's borders, and they *did*. And so, to our great surprise, the Cold War came, bit by bit, to an end.

A few years after that, this thing called the World Wide Web emerged from the laboratories of the scientists and engineers and began to change things.

Walls were coming down. Borders remained, but it seemed as if some of those borders might become more permeable. Many believed that the Internet would promote open, rational discussion across boundaries, free from the oversight of bureaucrats or tyrants, enabling democracy and promoting reconciliation.

All these years later, we can see that those hopes were naïve. Indeed, some people regard such hopes as dangerous, “globalist” fantasies. We are now living in what seems to be an Alice-in-Wonderland version of

those heady years. There are now so many boundaries, walls, and maps. Red, Blue, Purple (I see that “Magenta” is the latest color-coded category); the Coasts over against the nation’s great, broad center. We read daily about “trouble at the border,” but which one? There are so *many* troubled borders: the borders between Guatemala and Mexico, Mexico and California, Juarez and El Paso; the borders between Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus; between Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank. We listen to the news and ask, “Will Scotland choose independence? Will Catalunya? What is going to happen to that once open Irish border?”

The pandemic has made all this worse, of course. I grew up on the banks of the Niagara River. The border between us and our northern neighbor was not imaginary. It was official. It marked a difference that was real, sometimes annoying, but always interesting. But it seemed more of a gate than a wall. It is painful to read that Canadians now view cars with American license plates with suspicion, resentment, and, sometimes, fear. I understand this, but I don’t like it.

Our readings today talk about borders and barriers between brothers and sisters. In our first reading, from the fourteenth chapter of the Letter to the Romans, Paul begins by insisting that “weak” brothers and sisters must be welcomed as equal members of the

community despite—or maybe better, from Paul’s point of view, *along with*—their “weakness.” Paul understood human nature, so he adds something like, “By the way, my strong brothers, your welcome must be genuine, no superficial words designed to trap your brothers into resuming an old debate.” But what is this debate?

Well, it seems to be about ritual and ascetical practice. Paul mentions food, drink, and holy days. The so-called “weak” seem to be those who are maintaining a strict, perhaps even scrupulous, set of practices that involve diet and the sacred calendar. Though we cannot be entirely sure, most commentators believe that these strict conservatives are Jewish Christians, who refrain from eating meat because they do not want to risk consuming non-kosher food or meat butchered in connection with a pagan ritual; and they are probably continuing faithfully to observe the holy days of the Jewish calendar. It would be Paul’s position that, while there are spiritual dangers in this insistence on strict religious observance—Paul insists that it is the gift of faith in Jesus Christ that gets you right with God, not strict religious observance—he also clearly believes that it is even more dangerous for someone to treat another person with contempt in order to prove a point. In short, though Paul does not know the Roman Christian community at first hand, he suspects there is a serious

fault line, a wall right down the middle of that community

Perhaps predictably, Paul regards love as the antidote to these walls and divisions. He will write at verse 15, “If your brother or sister is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love.” Loving concern for the other person is more important than proving that you are right.

But, for Paul, love is not just a nice word or a fleeting emotion. Love is action made possible because God is transforming lives through the grace that comes from faith in Jesus Christ. Paul wouldn’t understand our love of self-help books. For him, *help* comes from God. We are empowered to love and help others because God loves and helps us. What God is doing in Jesus Christ calls all our boasting, pride, and strife—our need to be right—into question. He writes, “If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God” (14:8–10). For Paul, the entry of the Lord Jesus into the human heart through the gift of faith changes things and changes

things forever. Walls, borders, divisions, and disagreements exist. They are real, but they are always provisional, because all such things are judged by the One who came into the world not to condemn it but to save it (John 3).

It is hard for people to look at the world in this way. We like to believe we are the center of the universe. But Paul wants to change all that. It's like when I want to take a picture on my iPhone, and I realize that the camera is pointing at my face. I have to click on that little image to turn the camera around so I can see the world and not just me. That's what Paul wants to do for us today, and so does Jesus. Jesus wants us to forgive, not so we can become more saintly, more virtuous, but so we can participate in God's mercy and compassion in the world. Mercy is not just for me.

I wrote this week in the newsletter about Alexander Crummell, whose feast day we celebrated on Thursday. Father Crummell was Black. He was an Episcopal priest, who was born here in New York in 1818 and died in 1898. He was a missionary, a teacher, a philosopher, a moral theologian, and a founder of institutions. He believed in the philosophy of Pan-Africanism. He recognized that there was a wall between Black and white people that was real and very resistant to change. But he refused to live by that wall's

rules. He insisted on the beauty, brilliance, and goodness of Black people. His great mission in life was to tell his Black brothers and sisters that they must not allow the wall of hatred to destroy them, even though the odds against them were very great indeed. He knew this from bitter experience. The Episcopal Church had not been good to him. He was refused admittance to General Seminary. He was ordained in Massachusetts but refused a seat at diocesan convention. He fought against the efforts of white Southern bishops to deprive Black congregations a voice at diocesan or general conventions. As I read about Fr Crummell's hard-fought battles this week, I kept expecting to learn that all that contempt had destroyed his faith. But it never did, and it suddenly occurred to me that Father Crummell, good disciple of the Lord Jesus that he was, felt sorry for those who believed that their walls and divisions were stronger than the Lord. I think Father Crummell really believed these words, "Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's" (Romans 14:8b). To give up, to turn his back on his decidedly weaker brethren would be to proclaim what he did not believe: that hatred and contempt were more powerful than God's saving grace.

We live in a hard and bitter time, but perhaps we can avoid bitterness of mind and heart if we allow God's grace to sustain our faith. As Saint Paul says in another

place, “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body” (1 Corinthians 6:19).

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