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St Mary the Virgin
Epiphany 7 A
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I have a friend who once told me that he had been inoculated with enough Christianity over the years that he was now immune to its message. If we are honest, this is at least partially true for most of us. Sometimes we hear the words of the liturgy or scripture at worship and they wash over us and just don't penetrate.

With that in mind and in an effort to really hear, please take up your bulletins and pray the collect on page 1. Please follow my lead and pray this collect slowly and think carefully about what we are really praying.

O Lord, you have taught us that without love whatever we do is worth nothing: Send your Holy Spirit and pour into our hearts your greatest gift, which is love, the true bond of peace and of all virtue, without which whoever lives is accounted dead before you. Grant this for the sake of your only Son Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

This is a pretty powerful prayer brimming with some startling statements....without love whatever we do is worth nothing, without love in our hearts we are as good as dead. What are we to make of these harsh words? What are we to do to get this love that is so important?

First, I want to remind you that the love being commended is not the romantic kind of love we celebrated on Valentine's Day. [We have members of the children's choir with us this morning for the sermon since there is

no Sunday School due to the three-day holiday....so children welcome. I have a question for you. Did you celebrate Valentines Day in school? Do children still exchange valentines? When you give a valentine to someone, what are you trying to tell that person?]

Christian love is not primarily an emotion. It is an act of will. When Jesus tells us to love our neighbors, or even more startling to love our enemies, he's not suggesting that we respond to them with a warm, fuzzy feeling. What he is expecting of us is that we are willing to work for their well-being even when it means sacrificing our own well-being to fulfill his command.

When Jesus speaks to us about loving our enemies, or sharing what we have with the poor, he's urging us to see the world through his eyes. It's easy enough to love those who love you, but darned hard to love those who speak ill of you and wish to do you harm.

Jesus really is a revolutionary advocating a vision where the primary value is loving and caring, not getting more for ourselves while others go without food and shelter. Let me be blunt...without deep and abiding faith in Jesus this kind of talk is just plain weird. The worldly wise view all of life as a struggle to get more for themselves, most often at the expense of others. As the old saying goes, "It's a dog eat dog world."

Thinkers on the right and the left are more than happy to tell us that us that Christianity is nothing more than idiocy. Political philosopher and darling of the Tea Party, author of Atlas Shrugged and The Fountainhead, Ayn Rand, wrote, "If any civilization is to survive, it is the morality of altruism that men [and women] have to

reject.” Or on the political left there is Karl Marx, the founder of modern Communism who observed, “The social principles of Christianity preach cowardice, self-contempt, abasement, submissiveness and humbleness.”

Needless to say, we Christians believe the views of Rand and Marx are misinformed and without merit.

When we pray, in the Lord’s Prayer, “thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” we are praying for God’s kingdom to become a reality on this earth here and now, a kingdom where love prevails rather than hate and retribution, where it’s not “me first” but “what can we do to make this world more like the world God want’s us to live in?”

On March 1 our observance of Lent begins with Ash Wednesday services. On Ash Wednesday we are reminded, “Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” One of the values of Lent is that it calls upon us to not just repent of our sins, but to take positive steps to live our lives more as Jesus would have us live them....lives where love motivates us and our actions. We are reminded, too, on Ash Wednesday, that our time on earth is limited and if we want to find true joy in living, the key to fulfillment is loving as Jesus did. Love transforms, love heals, love redeems and brings new life and it is a foretaste of heaven.

Christian loving is not easy. Then, just to put a fine point on Jesus expecting us to live the values of God’s kingdom, at the end of today’s gospel passage we hear Jesus telling us, “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

The Greek word in this passage is “telos” which can be translated as “perfect” but it refers not so much to moral perfection as it does to something that has matured and reached its expected end or function. The “telos” of fig tree is to grow and mature and bear good fruit. That is its mission. What Jesus is telling us when counseling perfection, is that our mission in life is to love and seek the best for others.

Biblical scholar, David Lose suggests, Jesus might not be “simply commanding something OF US but also commending something IN US. That is, perhaps Jesus simply knows that we have more to give, that we can be and do more than we have settled for, and that we can absolutely make a difference in the world if we simply believe in ourselves.” (Emphasis added)

Now let us return to the prayer near that beginning of today’s Eucharist, a prayer that collects up the scriptures overarching theme, which is why it is referred to as a “collect.” That prayer is a reminder us that without love our lives are not worth much. But be of good cheer. Each of us can love with generous and open hearts. Love is as close as our decision to love others and ourselves as Christ loves us. So...let us love one another as Christ loves us....in such loving we discover a life worth living. AMEN