

The Essential Ingredient

The word essential has loomed large in our consciousness this year...especially since the pandemic began. It has been applied to many areas never before considered necessary, much less essential in our daily lives. It has been applied to people and interactions which we had, but never thought about as we went about our daily activities. According to Webster's dictionary essential can be used as an adjective modifier meaning something that is absolutely necessary or extremely important or it can be a noun; that thing itself that is absolutely necessary. This spring as the novel corona virus began its deadly spread across the globe and invaded country after country, not only were doctors and nurses found to be essential to survival, but so were the janitors and housekeepers of the facilities where the scene of the struggle was waged. And as the crises spread, so were others who held some of the lowest paid and least respected jobs in our society. They and the jobs they performed, the picking of the vegetables and the processing of the meat and even the manning of the cash registers were suddenly deemed essential to the functioning of the system; to keeping everything running smoothly. They were suddenly an essential ingredient in keeping the status quo of everyone else's life normal. Since essential has been so much a part of our current vocabulary and conversation this year when I read the opening verse of Paul's advice to the Roman believers from today's passage, it seemed to me he was addressing something that he thought was essential for them to include in their discipleship as they came together as a community of believers and followers: an essential ingredient for a follower of Christ to have in their relationships with others in their community. So my question becomes if these folks who are doing these essential functions for our society to continue moving smoothly, are really essential members of our society, why are they shown the disrespect of the lowest of wages and benefits...wages and benefits so low that they cannot sustain an adequate lifestyle with a single job? It seems to me that our society itself is lacking in an essential ingredient toward them. Essential ingredients were pointed out to me much earlier in my life...in an entirely different context. That's the nature of something being considered essential. It is the first thing considered when beginning to explore a new concept. In engineering it would be considered the foundational concept. In science, it is the basic concept upon which you build a theory that you test; it must hold or nothing works. When I was first learning how to cook, especially in the area of baking, both my mother and my grandmother emphasized how important, how essential, it was to balance certain ingredients when preparing the cake batter...the ingredients that you placed together and how they were blended together were both essential for the finished product to be the best it could be. The same can be said of human society and relationships...for our human societies to work best, many gifts and talents are needed and they all need to be blended well for the finished product...the society, the community which is to live together, to be healthy. The individuals all need to be members of the community; and each needs to be valued, respected, and given dignity for the community to be healthy...or as time passes and a crisis happens...essential functions fail and chaos happens. These are all observations which have been made about various cultures throughout history by both historians and sociologists. These are not new observations. Yet what we often fail to see is that our Lord has provided us with the answer in the guidance given to us from the beginning in our scriptures. The passage we have before us from Matthew today is about relationships

within a community. In a particular community, but in reality, these are truths about all human communities because they are truths about human beings. In some translations, the text reads “if another member of the church”, in other translations, the text reads “if a brother or sister”. One commentary on the passage I read quipped the final verse should say “for where two or three are gathered there will be disagreements.” And history has proven that too often to be the case, even when we gather in our Lord’s name. This text is also a text written in a time when the early community was struggling within a hostile environment as well as with defining its own identity, so there is an element within the passage that is the basis for inclusion or exclusion into the community. Again, this passage’s focus is about the importance of relationships and what is essential for the health of the community. This Matthew passage is about a process of creating a path to reconcile and restore relationships when something has gone wrong. I mentioned that we have skipped some of the Matthew text which seems relevant to this topic; in particular the parable recorded that Jesus told just before this is about the shepherd who with a flock of 99 safely in the fold went searching for the one which was lost. So although during Jesus’ life the church did not exist, that Jesus would see that conflict would arise among his followers in the aftermath of his coming death and give them guidance for their behavior as part of his preparation sheds light on this teaching. Many of Jesus’ teachings have to do with the importance of human relationships, about our caring for one another, and conflict among us is certainly not rare. In the context in which Matthew was writing after Jesus’ death, the early followers of Jesus were just beginning to form their own separate congregations; to actually form churches following the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Those of Jewish heritage were being forced from synagogues; those of gentile backgrounds were struggling to be accepted into these communities. Many of both groups were tempted to return to their previous ways of life acceptable in the wider society. This temptation was the primary “sin” being felt among the members. The believers are to attempt reconciliation with those so tempted with love, but are to remain faithful followers. The purpose of this passage is to invite the one who is perceived to be moving away from the faith back into the faith; to reach out to include, not just once but repeatedly. This is also an important aspect about this passage. It is a reminder that relationships take work. Today, so many people use the digital world to express their thoughts and opinions without any serious consideration as to the possible harm they may do. There are so many platforms available which require absolutely no personal interactions at all; many of these are then broadcast on news media and reach millions and enflame hatred and prejudice, creating violence. There is no work involved in this type of “relationship”. The world of Matthew, the world in which Jesus lived, was a world of personal relationship where community was based on personal interactions. Even there, the creation of community was difficult and required hard work. At the end of these verses in Matthew, the passage seems to turn harsh, but it still reminds us that Jesus is among us and he told us he was that shepherd who would continue to search for the one lost sheep. Throughout the teachings of Jesus there is one strong thread, the thread of love and compassion...and that is the thread that the passage from Romans lifts up for us as being the essential element for a community which seeks to follow Jesus. It is that thread which is essential for a disciple to be able to live into their discipleship by “putting on the Lord Jesus Christ.” Paul lists the various commandments, but uses the same instruction as did Jesus when asked which were the greatest commandments forming them into what contains the

essential ingredient which makes fulfilling all the others possible. Romans 13: 8-10 reads "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet'; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law." And that last verse contains the essence of what the essential nature of the love that Jesus was trying to teach to his disciples when he bade them to love each other as he loved them. In the Greek that is agape love, love that does not think of self. That is the kind of love that that song that was popular a couple of decades ago described with the lyric that said: "What the world needs now is love, sweet love." That is the kind of love that builds communities where all share equally in opportunity, in respect and dignity and are valued as God's beloved children. Agape love is not an easy form of love but it is the one that allows us to look at all others as fellow children of the same Lord who created us because within each of them there resides that image of God that our scripture tells us is there. It is that type of love which is need in our world today; it is the love that Christ calls us to share with others as we witness to his presence in this broken world. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.