



September 13, 2020
The 15th Sunday after Pentecost
The Rev. Emily Williams Guffey
Romans 14: 1-12

From 1983 to 1987 40 million Care Bears were sold here in this country. Do you remember them?

There was Cheer Bear.
There was Wish Bear.
There was Friend Bear.
There was Share Bear.
There was Funshine Bear.
There was Grumpy Bear (who was blue in color, because it is important to remember that it is okay to feel blue and to feel grumpy).
There was, famously, Tender Heart Bear, a brown bear with a big red heart whose character was to help others to show and express their feelings and to always encourage people to be as caring as possible.

And then, the largest in my life was Love-A-Lot Bear, a pink bear with two magenta hearts on the belly. Love-A-Lot Bear loves to spread the love. If there is a way to spread the love, Love-A-Lot will be there to do it.

I was lucky enough when I was maybe five to receive a Love-A-Lot Bear. And indeed, it was love at first sight. Love-A-Lot Bear, whom I came to call just "Bear," went with me everywhere.

Every time I left the house, Love-A-Lot Bear was clutched under my arm close to my chest. Every game I played inside the house — playing "school," playing "kitchen" — Bear was there as my companion. Each night as I went to sleep, again there was Bear, against my chest, under my right arm, assuring me that: Yes, I was loved, No, I was not alone. Yes, I was safe.

And when Love-A-Lot Bear has in fact two bright hearts right on the belly, how could I forget that I was safe and loved?

Our reality, of course, as humans is that it is very easy...
to forget that we are loved,
to forget that we are safe,
to forget that we are worthy,
to forget that we are valued,

to forget that we are appreciated,
to forget that we are holy.

Paul, as he's writing to the Romans, understands this and knows it and sees the behavior among humans who forget how deeply they are loved. In the portion that we hear from the letter today he is exhorting them, "*Whether you eat everything or you eat only some things, whatever you do, do it in the name of God...because it is God who created you. It is God who loves you, and it is God to whom you report. Whatever you do, whatever you decide, whatever you think, however you feel give it to the Lord.*"

And as such, we, as brothers and sisters of one another, have no place to judge or criticize or hurt or blame or scorn another, because we all, each one of us, are loved and cherished by God. And we all report to the same God of love. It is not our position to blame or judge or criticize or to make anyone feel anything less than loved.

Whatever you do, whatever you decide, however you spend your time, however you devote your treasure, however you offer your talent, whatever you do, do it for love of God, and, by extension, for love of neighbor.

And it is, in Paul's words and in our words today, as simple as that.

Now, I'll say, it's not as easy as that. It is not always easy. But it is as simple as that.

It is easier to love, it is easier to show love when we feel loved. It is so much harder to love and show love when we are feeling alone and isolated and afraid and hurt. It is human instinct when we hurt to instinctively hurt another. It is part of our instinct when we're afraid to then be fearful of another, to blame one another.

But Paul says just before this passage, "*Do not conform to that pattern. Do not conform to that instinct. Do not conform to the pattern of the world...but be renewed in the transforming of your mind. Be renewed by the transforming of your mind and the opening of your heart.*"

These days, my brothers and sisters, there are so many reasons to hurt.

There are so many reasons to be afraid.

There are so many reasons to feel less than enough, to feel insecure, to feel dissatisfied, to feel upset. And each of these reasons is an opportunity to choose love over hurt, to choose empathy over judgment.

This Covid pandemic is exposing ever more clearly what is already broken, what is already hurting, what is already unjust and already unequal in our common lives:

Climate change...as fires destroy the West,

Racism...as our brothers and sisters of color are treated unequally, negligently, violently,

Our economy...as millions lose income and insurance,

Education...as our students and our teachers and our parents and our administrators struggle all together to achieve high quality and equal opportunities in this new school year.

There is much to grieve. There are many losses to be felt. There are many reasons to feel overwhelmed and alone and even unloved.

But the truth that we must remember is that we are loved. We are loved. You are loved. I am loved. We are all loved by God. It is God to whom we report. It is God who has created our hearts to love God and, indeed, to love one another.

So, I want to tell you something that I keep telling myself as I feel the weight of the world increasingly. I tell you, as I tell myself, to let yourself feel that love. Cling to it. Cleave to it, as a Love-A-Lot Bear under your arm. Let it be a seal upon your heart that protects you from any judgment or scorn or even despair.

Take care of yourself in these endlessly fraught days...
to keep your spirit supple
to seek nourishment for your soul
to embrace comfort
to cling to security (even when such comfort and security do not look like what you would expect or like how they had looked before).

Let love fall upon your heart as a seal for it is the one bond in our lives.

My Friends, be tender in heart with one another and with yourself...
and love a lot.

AMEN