This weekend would have been my daughter Michelle’s final baseball tournament of the year, if COVID19 had not cancelled the season. It would have been a great culmination of a season of comradery, caring, keeping fit, enjoying a sport she’s loved and played since the age of 4! It would have been a great day of families gathering, cheering, encouraging, smiling, laughing and enjoying a day in the sun, without a care in the world! It would have been a great day to wind down summer and set folks eyes on the school year and beloved activities returning that one has missed over the summer months… It would have been a great day.

And then I remember many of the other tournament weekends that were also supposed to be great too. I remember the intense competitive spirit of some and the desire to win at all costs. I remember hecklers with belittling comments that diminished and demeaned players as their family and friends looked on. I recall family members in the stands complaining about how the league was run and how they felt some teams were stacked. I remember coaches being VERY bitter that not enough players showed up to play (work schedules, moving to college/university schedules tend to be one’s priority) so games had to be defaulted. I remember thrown bats, people tossed for questioning the umpires calls. It should have… could have been a great day…

And it would have, if the folks who were angry at the league commissioners, had spoken to them and shared their frustrations about how they perceived the league was being run. And if the league officials had listened to them, presented their side of the story and both parties had come away with new insights and a better understanding of why they ran the league the way they do. It would have been a better day, if the coaches had spoken to the players at the start of the season and shared their expectations including advising the coach if they are unable to play due to scheduling conflicts. It would have been a better day, if the players had heard encouraging cheers from the crowd instead of heckling and intimidation. It would have been a better day if the disgruntled players and fans had modeled love; if rants and complaints were transformed to words of encouragement. Instead of mocking and gossiping… decency, respect, gratitude and humility were lived out. And if you think this type of behaviour happens just at the ballpark… think again, because I’ve seen it happen in corporate boardrooms, retail stores, the local school, the community park, and even at church!

Conflict is a part of life. It’s guaranteed; as we come to every situation with different life experiences… differing viewpoints… diverse expectations… different cultural traditions and norms… unique gifts and abilities… and a broad spectrum of personalities and character traits. And it is no wonder we react to conflict with a full range of responses; from silence to violence and everything in between. Yet it doesn’t have to be this way… and it shouldn’t be this way… and it wouldn’t be this way… if we heeded the teachings of Jesus (such as today’s gospel lesson) and truly lived out the greatest commandment he gives… “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and love your neighbour as yourself.”

That’s it. It seems so simple. Love is the answer! Yet when we talk about conflicts between God’s people, between families, between communities, between nations… we often wonder ‘what’s love got to do with it’? Well let me show you… I invite you to look at the front cover of your bulletin… where you will see one person’s responses to the question – Who is my neighbour?

WHO IS MY NEIGHBOUR? SOMEONE IN TROUBLE… We can respond with avoidance, fear, judgment. We can avoid eye contact with the woman who has addictions, fear the man who’s tattooed and wearing leather… pass judgment on both of these people by insisting they are a threat to our safety and the safety of our community OR we can respond in love; by listening, deeply listening to their stories and letting our hearts feel their pain, their frustration, their anger and sadness. We can be present with them, praying for them, offer encouraging words to them, and share of ourselves with them… advocating for changes in systems that won’t allow all children of God to develop to their greatest potential.
WHO IS MY NEIGHBOUR? SOMEONE THAT’S ILL… We can respond in silence: I don’t know what to say, so I won’t call… I don’t like hospitals so I won’t visit… I don’t know how to deal with the thought of this person dying, so I will stop all contact and pretend it’s not happening… OR we can respond in love by sending a card, going for a visit (even if it’s uncomfortable) and being there for them. Can we sit and listen… hold them… cry with them… love them.

WHO IS MY NEIGHBOUR? SOMEONE WHO HAS LOST SOMEBODY… We can respond by leaving them alone… (“Surely they will want time to grieve!”) We can stop inviting them over for bridge or suppers… (“It was always something we did as a couple!”) OR we can respond in love; by offering hope, praying for them, sitting with them, listening to them… respect their wishes, and let them guide you in your actions.

Though we may not have a choice as to who buys the house next door or what countries or communities… which individuals or causes have great needs, we can control our responses! We own and are accountable for our actions or inaction; for our words or our silence… for our choices which proclaim who we are and whose we are. Paul says, “Owe no one anything, except to love one another”. THIS is the fulfillment of the Law.

If we love one another… we act with respect towards each other… we have patience with each other… we listen intently to each other… we seek to learn from each other and honour the others experiences. If we love one another we endeavor to reconcile our differences and grow into mutual relationships. If we love each other, we spend our energies building up people, not tearing them down… we celebrate and nurture the unique gifts and abilities God has given each of us, instead of placing a value on our gifts and abilities and ranking them; with some of greater worth than others. If we love each other, we act with compassion towards all of God’s creations… embracing the least among us… advocating for justice for all… fighting for peace… working tirelessly to reconcile wrongdoings and making amends for past hurts; whether we caused them or not!

What’s love got to do with is? The gospel hinges on it…. everything in Christianity begins and ends with love. Why did Christ come to die for us? Love! How does God offer His grace? Love! What makes God so patient with us? Love! What keeps God interested and involved in our lives? Love! And how do we deal with conflict in a responsible and caring way? Love!

If we are to be Christ’s church, modeling to the world the very love Jesus commands of us, we cannot live amongst God’s people as judges, hypocrites or gossips. Rather, Jesus calls us to be among God’s beloved as ones who owe nothing to anyone, except love; which means we treat people the way God has treated us; with unending forgiveness, mercy, compassion… with love that sacrifices, serves and seeks to restore and renew. If we hold each other in this crucible of Holy love… rather than triangulating folks into choosing sides, leaving situations that are hurtful rather than confronting the hurt and seeking restoration, we allow ourselves to be vulnerable, we share our brokenness, we trust each other with our truths, we see each other as beloved.

I started by saying it could have been a great day! It IS a great day! For Paul reminds us the time is at hand… our salvation is near! It’s time to mend fences, build bridges, love our neighbour, be leaders in our world --- modeling to all how to live love, share love, embody love, embrace love and proclaim love! And as a first step, after worship, I invite you to think of a conflict that you are avoiding, a person or system that is angering you, a situation that is making your blood boil. Take a piece of paper and list all the reasons that make sense to you for not dealing directly with this issue. Then write down the reasons you should deal with this issue. And then give it to God/Jesus; pray for direction… for words… for courage… for wisdom… for love …

For when two or three are gathered in His name human nature dictates conflicts will arise. Yet Love promises to guide us and undergird our honest and faithful examinations and discussions. And Love’s presence will enable healing to occur, empathy to be shown, learning and growing to happen, people and situations to be transformed… not because the church is ours, but because it is His… the One we call Love Incarnate! All Praise be to God! Amen and Amen!