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Romans 12:9-21

Genuine Love

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Grace and peace to you from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the One who was and is and is to come. Amen.

The Letter of Paul to the Christians in Rome has long been held up as his explanation of the gospel of God's righteousness which saves all who believe. At the time he wrote it, he was about to leave for Jerusalem to bring a collection of funds for the impoverished Jewish Christian believers living there. We know that he was aware that a trip to Rome was a part of God's evangelism plan for him. Such a journey had long been on his mind. He knew also that the trip to Jerusalem would be hazardous, and we know from the book of Acts that Paul was arrested there and came to Rome only in chains, as a prisoner.

The book of Romans is addressed to both Jews and Gentiles and it reflects passages from both the Old Testament and the Gospels. The gospel Paul presents is meant to be a familiar one to those in Rome, even though they had heard it first from other preachers.

Today's reading is a discourse on genuine love. You might see it as a teaching on being a Christian. It certainly contains key understandings for anyone who is truly open to welcoming the good news of Jesus Christ. And yet being genuine in our love for others is no easy matter!

Contrary to the experiences of many new believers, such love is not all sweetness and light. Genuine love goes deeper than mere sentiments and it is not something we are born understanding. We must grow into it, suffer what it means to have people hate us or betray us or turn against us out of jealousy or rage. In other words, some people have not yet been truly challenged to love in this genuine way. And it is not until they reach an age of maturity--and that happens at different times for each of us--that they wrestle with how to show genuine love.

From sibling rivalry to surviving the playground bullies and the high school cliques, to dealing with workplace and neighborhood hierarchies, we have opportunities to learn how to: as Paul says "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good." And Paul wants us to understand that just knowing what is expected is not enough; our behavior must reflect "mutual affection." We must strive to "outdo one another in showing honor," and be "zealous, ardent in spirit, continuously "serving the Lord."

Overwhelming, isn't it? Fortunately, we are not perfect and God knows this. I guess I learned a bit about this when I was in elementary school and my younger brother John was driving me crazy. He continuously wriggled and squirmed and could not be still. He sat on the kitchen counter and opened and shut the cabinet doors. He tapped and prodded and pushed things around. I now know he likely had attention deficit disorder and was simply unable to be otherwise. It was my mother who helped me to accept him just as he was. She said, "Sometimes the people who are most difficult to love are the very ones who need love most." Bingo! That hit home.

We are told to "Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, and persevere in prayer." None of these actions are automatic. They must be practiced throughout our lifetimes. And these next ones are so important in this time of pandemic: "Contribute to the needs of the saints" (remember to give to our food pantry) and "extend hospitality to strangers." This last one was brought home to me just last week when a new neighbor woman I had greeted daily in the yard below ours did something I had thought about doing but had not yet acted upon.

I went out one morning to find a gift basket in the fence filled with edible goodies and a note from "your neighbors." Oops!

Alright, it's not so difficult to show love even to strangers-if we make it part of our daily intentions. Wearing a mask at the grocery or the pharmacy these days means that a simple smile won't quite do it. Well...then say something that gives someone joy or better yet--causes outright laughter.

Here we come to the most difficult part of this teaching: "Bless those who persecute you and do not curse them." What is our first instinct? Be honest. It might be outrage. When we first moved into our new home in Prescott about 14 years ago, one of the first things I wanted to do was plant a garden. I spent a great deal of time and thought finding a see-through fence tall enough to deter the deer and strong enough to keep out javelina.

We quickly learned that we were not welcome in our new neighborhood. Our next door neighbor, a man my husband described as "a grump" who mostly lived apart from his wife in a "man cave" in their basement came raging up our driveway one day waving his arms and shouting at me: "Why would you buy a nice home like that and then put up a fence," (never mind that HIS backyard had a fence!)

I was astonished and stunned and brought to tears at his angry diatribe. He didn't wait for any answer and it's a good thing because I was literally speechless. Where was this coming from? I had tried to build a fence that did not cover up the beauty in our backyard. It was my husband Jim who took the initiative. He noticed the man regularly sitting on a lawn chair in his driveway smoking cigars. When Jim asked his wife Maureen when his birthday was, he presented him with a box of good cigars. Our neighbor, whose name was Cabot, rode a motorcycle and when our son purchased a motorcycle and sent us a picture; Jim took it over there and asked questions about it. Cabot was happy to share his vast knowledge of bikes. Eventually they went together to smoked cigars on the square in Prescott. When we moved away, they wanted us to stay in touch and we have done so.

Well, you have all had opportunities for loving your neighbor. But how many of you have had opportunities to love your enemy? Paul reminds us of an account in the Gospel of Luke when a Samaritan village refused to welcome Jesus. "When the disciples James and John saw what was happening, they asked, "Lord, do you want us to call down fire from heaven to destroy these people?" "But Jesus turned and corrected them for what they had said."

You see, Jesus continues to turn upside down our understandings. His way so often is not our way. But he would have us learn his way. Some manuscripts add to this passage from Luke to Luke 9:55: "Don't you know what spirit you belong to? The Son of Man did not come to destroy people's lives but to save them."

The last few verses in our reading may startle you. I know that the first time I read it, I was certain that it was not to be taken literally! What a horrifying image! "Do not seek revenge." That is not for us; so what is this about heaping burning coals on the heads of our enemies?

I recently asked a dear and faithful woman I know how she understood "feed them..." for by so doing you will heap burning coals on their heads." I wanted to know if she had a story about that verse.

"Oh yes! Do I have a sorry about that!" she said. She is a marketing consultant and told about a time when she was in her early twenties and had invested time and much creative energy in a thriving company. she had worked there for ten years. Many of her ideas and been used to help the company prosper over those years and she was earning good money. Not only that, but she had purchased stock options amounting to a quarter

of a million dollars. So when the recession hit in 2008 and she learned that the C.E. O. had done some "legal" maneuvering in order to divest the shareholders in his own company and add the profits to his own accounts. She was outraged, Worse yet, the word was out that he was firing every one of his loyal employees.

She was about the last one to be called in to see him. Just before she went in to see him, she heard a voice that told her to be kind. She said she was furious and wanted only to pour out her anger. Many of her fellow employees were threatening lawsuits and had dumped their anger on him over the past few days.

That still small voice gave her pause. When her boss started in on his prepared script, she interrupted him. "How are YOU doing? she asked. Stunned, he poured out his account of how hard it was to do what he was doing and how everyone hated him. His employees wanted to sue him, to burn down his house.

She let him talk out his feelings. And when he returned to the script which informed her that her trust had been betrayed, her loyalty counted for nothing and she had lost a quarter of a million dollars, she heard herself saying to him: "God has a plan in this. I am giving it to God. I am going to be ok."

Years later, this man came to her wanting to pay her \$5,000 a week if only he could retain her as a consultant. She accepted and still remains in his employ. She gives thanks to God each day that she is able to pass most of this gift on to other people in need. I am blessed to have such a friend who truly understands what Paul meant when he was passing on Jesus' teaching: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." May you be so blessed. Amen.