

Proper 17 (A) Labor Day Weekend

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Romans 12: (1-8), 9-21

TLC, Keene, NH

[OPENING SLIDE]

"The Labor of Love"

"Let love be genuine."

*If, in the spirit of the Reformation, justification by faith is the **article** by which the church stands or falls, αγαπη - love is the **practice** by which the church stands or falls.*

[Adapted from Fernandez, *Feasting on the Word (A)*, 4:18]

Introduction

"You know you're unloved if...

you play "hide & seek" with your parents and they hide in another town

you had to share your sandbox with the cat

you join the marching band in school and they give you a piano

you take a girl down the Tunnel of Love & she makes you swim

you were the only candidate for Class President & you came in fifth

the surgeon operating on you says, 'I'll take all calls.'"

[SLIDE # 2] Love ... a commodity ... in short supply. A weakness on full display in the news we consume, the movies we watch, or in any other way that this world seems to glorify what's worst about us. Relationships – of all stripes – strained ... without *and* at times within the Body of Christ.

Paul mercifully calls us back – *"by the mercies of God"* - poured out on us all.

Main Point:

What the church of the Lord Jesus has to offer "is an invitation to a new community that nurtures believers to live differently, and to live out their calling both within the faith community and the wider society. Identity and mission are central here." [Fernandez, 16]

[SLIDE # 3]

LOVE'S LABOR IS NO LABOR WHEN ITS BEGINNING AND END IS CHRIST.

Amen.

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[SLIDE # 4] Εκκλησία. The church. Lit. *"The called out ones."* A community – set apart – for a distinct mission in relation to world God places us. Encouraging us - the church – aka Trinity Lutheran Church – to be ever asking ourselves:

What is distinctive about us? What are our core values? The norms that guide and the practices that sustain us? Along with our being in the world, but not of it: How do we see ourselves in relation to the places God puts or sends us? What are we called to do? Who are we called to be? [Adapted from Fernandez, 14]

They're the kind of questions the church has been asking since its beginning. Yes, in every age – with each generation – we're called to "get back to it" ... bringing the life and light of Christ to a dying world! Yes, how do we dwell in Babylon, *and* remain the living and breathing testimonies of the crucified One?

[SLIDE # 5] That way? LOVE!

⁹ **Let love** (αγαπη) **be genuine** ("w/o hypocrisy, sincere, "not counterfeit"¹).

Far from conforming to the politicized, sexualized, self-realized views of love in the world, Paul brings us to another place, one rooted and lived out in the Spirit, *"by the mercies of God"* (12:1), that is, in our crucified and risen Savior. Jesus! It is He who both embodies such self-sacrificial love – and then, puts it on full display.

"O what wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul?"

*"When I was sinking down beneath God's righteous frown,
Christ laid aside His crown for my soul, for my soul,
Christ laid aside His crown for my soul."* [LSB 543:2]

This is the kind of love that makes us unique.

[SLIDE # 6] "In the craft of weaving, the first step is to construct a **warp**, the base lines of yarn upon [which] the weaver will weave a pattern or **weft**." Paul's admonitions in our text – especially to love – acts "as the warp to the weft" of the people of God – of what that people should look like – that "tapestry of life" that is the Church of Jesus Christ. Call it the "core values on which all the activities and ministries of the church" – even the church itself – is built. [Stackhouse, *Feasting on the Word (A)*, 4:14]

¹ Shielded esp. from "self-deceit" [Cranfield, *Romans*, 631]

Wherein, what follows in our text is not some “12-step” program to “build a better spiritual you.” [Schmitt, *CJ*, 43:3, 97] Not a set of principles or values to be turned on or off, or practiced only when folks are looking.

Rather, borne of the blood, sweat and tears of Calvary, love is a way of life – a part of our rewritten spiritual DNA – as we live, move and have our being in the world.

[SLIDE # 7] A garden to be tended and cultivated ...

What does this garden of love look like? One in which we continuously:

Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good [as opposed to getting out of life whatever we can, at whatever the cost].

“Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” [Philippians 4:8]

Real love celebrates all that is good in Christ, standing in clear opposition to lies and deception all that sin would seek to destroy. [Pippert, *Hope Has Its Reasons*, 94]

¹⁰ ***Loving one another*** [φιλαδελφία] ***with brotherly affection*** [φιλοστοργη – not with a “veneer of pleasantness” that often “covers over a spirit of backbiting, gossip, and prejudice”²]. ***Outdoing one another in showing honor.***

Child of God, we’re not loved because there is something that makes us worthy of such love. We are loved because when we were the least loveable, God loved/loves us in Christ. Whereby, now, out of such love:

[SLIDE # 8] “Each person we meet is infinitely precious and important ... Honoring another above ourselves means to listen to the other person, to be most aware of his or her hopes, joys, need and fears, and be considerate. ... The essence of love is not to concentrate on our own image, position and needs, but on the needs of others.” [Keller, *Romans 8-16 for You*, 120, 121] Here “zeal” and “fervency in the Holy Spirit” are equated with ...

¹¹ *Not being slothful in zeal, be fervent in [“the Holy”³] spirit, **serving the Lord***

² Keller, *Romans 8-16 for You*, 117, 120

³ The “real proof” of which “would not be effervescent religious excitement but renewed energy and determination in the humble and obedient service of the Lord Jesus.” [Cranfield, 635]

¹² **Rejoicing in hope, being patient in tribulation, being constant in prayer**
¹³ **Contributing** [κοινωνία – “communing or being in fellowship”] **to the needs of the saints and seeking to show hospitality** [again, love in action!]

“So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.” [Galatians 6:10]

“Blessing” – aka forgiving – each other when disagreements arise ...

¹⁴ *Bless those who persecute you; bless [aka forgive] and do not curse them* ¹⁵ **Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep** ¹⁶ **Live in harmony with one another** *Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly* **Never be wise in your own sight.**

Again, this is what sets the church apart ... makes it unique. Borne out many of the stories many of you have shared as to why some of you joined *this* congregation.⁴ Whereby, looking at these characteristics set forth in our text, which, by the grace of God, *are still* **alive and well**? Let us rejoice! Give thanks. Continually look for ways to put them into practice.

Yet, let us ask ourselves which, by that same grace, *needs* some **cultivation** – even pruning – fertilization, some Spirit-soaking rain? Pick one to work on. Pray it. Contemplate it throughout the day. Look for ways to put it into practice.

[SLIDE # 9] Even among your enemies, says Paul in vv. 17-19.

¹⁷*Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.* ¹⁸*If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.* ¹⁹*Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”*

Comforted that ours is not to exact vengeance, a prerogative resting w/God alone.

²⁰ **To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head** [i.e. repentance may come, and then, faith].”

⁴ “Growing churches often report that those who joined after a time of visiting did so because they found in the community a spirit that attracted them by its power of love and hospitality, not just in the way the members treated visitors, but also in the way they treated *each other*.” [Stackhouse, *Feasting on the Word (A)*, 4:18]

²¹ *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

Whatever *may* result from the love of Christ freely given, our neighbor will have been served – and maybe saved – by love. [Adapted from Keller, 123-24]⁵

[SLIDE # 10]

LOVE'S LABOR IS NO LABOR WHEN ITS BEGINNING AND END IS CHRIST.

Conclusion

[SLIDE # 11] The nature of love revisited ...

"When my grandmother got arthritis, she couldn't bend over and paint her toenails anymore. So my grandfather does it for her, even when his hands got arthritis too. That's love."—Rebecca, age 8

"When someone loves you, the way they say your name is different. You just know that your name is safe in their mouth."—Billy, age 4

"Love is when you go out to eat and give somebody most of your French Fries without making them give you any of theirs."—Chrissie, age 6

"Love is what makes you smile when you're tired."—Terri, age 4

Such is that nature of love ... more than words, but love in action! The ethos of God's *"called out ones."* The air we breathe, the water in which we swim.

A garden to be cultivated ... both within the body of Christ, and without. Where, when it is in full bloom, it is a thing of great beauty.

"Let love be genuine ... rejoicing ... patient ... constant ... generous."

Where, in God's economy of grace:

[SLIDE # 12]

LOVE'S LABOR IS NO LABOR WHEN ITS BEGINNING AND END IS CHRIST.

Amen.

⁵ Of course, "Enemies may be so dangerous that to have anything to do with them is to invite them to sin. In that case, the 'good you can do them is to stay away from them.'" [Keller, 124]

[Bible Study:]

READING THE LABEL:

If you were asked to describe the biblical concept of love to a friend, how would you describe it?

Recall a time in your life when you saw this type of love on display? What were the circumstances? What emotions did it stir in you?

[In chapters 1-11, Paul has put love on full display – that *“while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”* Yes, we were on our way to our execution, when a stay is ordered. Where, in the face of the overwhelming evidence piled up against us, and the hammer is coming down lock us up and throw away the key, the Judge (God) surprisingly declares, “Not guilty!” How can this be? Love. Where the condemned are justified, sinners are sanctified and hopeless are glorified. Hurrah! Good news! So, now what? What will be the response? Paul describes it in Romans 11-16.]

UNCORKING THE BOTTLE:

Read Romans 12:1-21.

Taking our first pass, what grabs you? What new insights? Surprises? Questions?

If we are going to talk about the impetus for love, what is it (vv. 1-2)? What is the Christian’s motivation for being good?

Why do you think Paul uses the image of a *“living sacrifice”* to describe the disciple’s response to the mercy of God?

J. B. Phillips paraphrases v. 2 by saying, *“Don’t let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold.”* In what ways are we influenced and pressured to conform to this world?

AMPLIFIED BIBLE: “And do not be conformed to this world [any longer with its superficial values and customs], but be transformed *and* progressively changed [as you mature spiritually] by the renewing of your mind [focusing on godly values and ethical attitudes], so that you may prove [for yourselves] what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect [in His plan and purpose for you].”

THE MESSAGE: “Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.”

In the midst of the fray, how does one “renew” their minds in this (v. 2)?

To our text for this Sunday, what does “*love that is genuine*” look like (v. 9)?

How would the kind of love that Paul describes in vv. 9-16 transform our relationships with our brothers and sisters in Christ? How about with those who are our enemies?

In the more difficult vv. 17-21, what do you hear the Holy Spirit saying?

What’s with the “*burning coals*” thing (v. 20)?

[BRUCE: “‘Treat your enemy kindly, for this may make him ashamed and lead to his repentance.’ In other words, the best way to get rid of an enemy is to turn him into a friend, and so ‘overcome evil with good’ (v. 21)!” – *Romans*, 230]

Is there someone in your past or present who has done you evil? What wrong responses are you tempted to? [Keller, *Romans 8-16 for You*, 124; following questions also.]

What would it look like for you to overcome evil with good in that specific situation? Don’t avoid them? Express loving words and actions towards them? Truly forgive them?

“There are boundaries, though. Verse 9 still reminds us that we are not loving wisely or truly when we enable someone to sin or sin against us. There are many degrees of hostility. Enemies may be so dangerous that to have anything to do with them is to invite them to sin. In that case, the ‘good you can do them is to stay away from them. We need to discern the motive behind our staying away – is it a form of payback, or a measure response aimed at blessing them in some way?” [Keller, 124]

Do you need to seek counseling from a wise Christian about how to deal with an issue or a wrong done to you?

SAVORING THE CONTENTS:

Which of the reflections offered by Paul is – by grace – alive and well in your garden? Rejoice! Give thanks. Continually look for ways to put them into practice.

Which aspect of love – again, by grace – needs some cultivation – fertilization, pruning, some Spirit-soaking rain?

Pick one this coming week to work on. Pray it. Contemplate it throughout the day. Look for ways to put it into practice. Then, celebrate the Spirit!

[Friday E-mail]: As so many not-so-casual-observers noted regarding the effects of COVID 19 on society, I don't believe there is a soul alive who would disagree that the pandemic put a strain on human relationships. Statistics are still bearing this out, as murder and suicide rates are up, as are cases of domestic and child abuse. My own bride a while back was berated by a grocery store clerk, simply because she was standing in the wrong place at the checkout line. Of all the casualties of this pandemic, it is my firm belief that relationships between people seem the most at risk. Where, for me personally, I may be able to get by on reduced paycheck, but stunt my ability to live in community with others, and my reason for being begins to shrivel up and perish.

Which makes Paul's admonition in **Romans 12:9-21** more relevant than ever. It is my sermon text for this coming Sunday, a nod to Labor Day, entitled: "The Labor of Love." Others have called this section "Living the Cross-Shaped Life," or "Marks of a True Christian." Where, Paul now lays out the "now what" that follows "the mercies of God" in Romans 12:1-8. Here, the Spirit's Word thru Paul is needed medicine – in any age, but – especially when genuine love – of the Christ-like variety is compromised or missing. Paul's admonition is not some "12-step" list to success. What Paul gives us is a portrait of what true discipleship looks like.

His main point: *"Let love be genuine."*

What kind of love is Paul talking about? One that is such a radical departure from all of the other types of love that the Bible practically had to invent a word for it. It's a love that is centered in Christ - poured out for us on Calvary's cross – the type of love that gives substance and meaning to every other kind of love. If you have that type of love, says the Church Father St. John Chrysostom, "you will not notice the loss of your money, the labor of your body, the toil of your words, your trouble or your ministering, but you will bear everything courageously."

It seems the world could use a little more love like that, or maybe your husband/wife, your child, your neighbor, your co-worker, or maybe even that soul next to you in the pew this Sunday. Where, only out of Christ's love, may we ... truly "*Love one another with brotherly affection, outdoing one another in showing honor.*"

Child of God, let us strive for this. The love of Christ brings us to it – to, at least, try. Granted, most days, we fall short. But let it not be today. As Christ both shows us the way, and is Himself the Way ... to love. SYOS!