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The Good Life: Getting Along

Romans 12:9-16

Happy Mother's Day! Art Linkletter used to say, "Kids say the darnedest things." They still do! I liked little Vienna's response when she looked off into the distance and finally admitted, "I don't really know about that one."

If you are visiting us this Mother's Day weekend, a warm welcome to you. We are studying Paul's letter to Christians in Rome, a diverse collection of Jews and non-Jews, rich and poor, free and slave. It was an odd group. But in fact, so are we! I wonder if you've ever pondered how unusual is what we are doing here? When we gather to worship God, it is a collection of folks that might otherwise NEVER get together. Different economic conditions, different social circles, different racial backgrounds. Were it not for our shared devotion to Christ, we might NEVER hang out together. But because of Jesus, we find ourselves a part of a very strange family!

Last week Paul described this family as the Body of Christ...and each of us as a body part. (Mr. Potato Head) And because we all have different gifts, each of us is essential to the work of the Kingdom. Paul even warns us not to envy someone else's role.

We were designed, all of us, to work together for the Kingdom. But here's the deal... the gifts...the temperaments...the diversity that makes us a great team... can also make it challenging to get along! So, after telling us how we can work together, Paul now tells us how to live together. Romans 12: 9-16:

Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.

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

The first cool car our family owned was a brand new, 1965 Chevrolet Malibu Super Sport. Dark blue, sports trim, 3 on the tree...it was beautiful. And it was a piece of junk...but that is another story. The backseat upholstery had a line right down the middle that separated the two sides. And because my sister and I used to fight in the back seat, my folks made a rule that we could not cross that middle line. It was like the demilitarized zone between North and South Korea.

So...to irritate Dana, I'd edge my little finger over...right up to the line...and then sneak it onto her side. She'd cry out, "He's on my side, he's on my side!" and I would make a strategic retreat before mom could turn around and catch me. Sometimes, it's not easy getting along in the family...especially when you have kids that were as different in so many ways as Dana and I were! And still are, honestly!

The same is true for the Church. How do we very diverse Christians live together in a way that honors Christ? That's what Paul describes in this part of chapter 12. Now, if you were to pick one word that would summarize the teachings of Jesus on our life together, what would it be? Love! When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment was, he responded with love. Love God...and love your neighbor. When he was gathered in the upper room with his disciples, he gave them a new commandment. "Love one another." In fact, he went on to say, "By this will all people know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

So it's not surprising that Paul leads off this laundry-list with "love." Our translation says, "Let love be genuine." But the actual Greek is simpler...and more profound: Agape Genuine. "Agape" is the highest Greek word for love. Up until now in Romans Paul only speaks about the love of God. "God's love has been poured into our hearts..." Rom 5.5 "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Rom 5:8 And "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ." Romans 8: 35. This sacrificial, undeserved *agape* love... all comes from God.

But NOW...Paul says...now that the Spirit lives in you...and has gifted and empowered you...now, YOU have God's agape love in you. So he starts with a declarative statement: LOVE IS GENUINE.

That word genuine is *an-hupokritos*. What does that sound like? Hypocrite. In ancient theatre, one actor often played several characters. He did so by wearing different masks as he delivered his lines. That actor was called the... *hypokritos*. A role-player. Guess which teacher first used the word "hypocrite" to describe a religious phony? Jesus! Jesus is the first teacher to use hypocrite in the way we now understand it. And...in Greek...if you add the syllable "*an*" to the front of a word, it means "not." So *an-hupokritos* means... NOT-HYPOCRITE.

Paul starts his description of Christian community by saying, "Genuine, no masks, no games, no play-acting sacrificial love is the most important defining quality of the church. Ok...but what does that look like? Paul's list is a description of what "genuine" love looks like. But he lists 12 things. We can't cover 12 things. But I can touch on a few. And I'd ask you to do this: listen for the one that cuts closest to the bone. Let the Holy Spirit prompt you as to which of these areas needs a tune-up, okay?

So...what does not-hypocrite agape look like? Well, for one thing, it's not wimpy. Right after Paul speaks of love, he speaks of hate. "Abhor what is evil...." That word "abhor" literally, it means "to loathe." Hate. And what doe hate? Evil. The powerful anti-God work of our spiritual enemy. There is stuff going on around us...evil stuff... that is so destructive...such a distortion of God's creation...that Paul says, we should loathe it! We should hate the works of the Devil. Now...notice this. It is not the person we loathe. Jesus told us we were to love our enemies. We don't have permission to hate anyone, no matter what they do. BUT...we can hate the evil that ensnares people's lives.

I was talking with a family this week of a teenager who is making some very bad, very painful decisions. They are trying to sort out how to love their child... even as they hate the evil into which she has been drawn. This is increasingly difficult. Our culture makes it almost impossible to separate persons from behavior. Our culture says it is impossible to love someone yet, at the same time, hate the evil that has ensnared them. In fact, the very idea that there might be an objective standard of good and evil...that infuriates our world. But as believers in God, we know there is a higher standard of right and wrong, good and evil. Agape love is not wimpy. We should HATE what is evil...

AND we should hold fast to the good. That phrase means to stick to something like glue. I was gluing some PVC pipe and Cyndi said, "Don't you want to put on some gloves before you work with that stuff? Won't it be hard to get off?" "Pfff...gloves are for sissies," I said. Or something like that. I'm still Sermon Notes

picking the glue off my hands. Paul says, "Glue yourself to the things that are good." Here' 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!" What is good in your life! CLING TO THAT!

So, genuine is not wimpy. Yet it IS humble. Paul writes: "Outdo one another in showing honor." In our competitive culture, where we move up the ladder and make a name for ourselves...what if we made a name for our self by being the best at honoring others. The best at lifting up others. Dale Bruner, a retired Whitworth prof, is one of the best at this I've ever seen. People pack into seminars ready to be wowed by his intellect. His commentary on Matthew is the best ever written. But every time, before he teaches, Dale takes a LOT of time honoring others...honoring the one who prayed and honoring the organizer of the event honoring the audience for being so brilliant. ~~e~~ were interested in honoring Dale, a great scholar. Dale was always more interested in honoring others.

Paul touches on this same theme later. Vs. 16-17. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. We could sum this up in four words: Don't be a snob!

One summer during sabbatical I was taking a tour through Holyrood Palace in Edinburgh. I listened as a young guide took us through the rooms. I had studied a little Scottish history so, when she made a statement that couldn't possibly be true, I asked a question for clarification. Two English women were nearby speaking louder than they realized. The first said, "That was a very good question the gentleman asked." The other responded, "That was no gentleman...that was an American." I don't think she meant that as a compliment.

The class system is a reality in Great Britain. But it's just as real in our country. Us and them. Haves and have nots. Our daughter Rachel has been working in Richmond, VA About a month into her internship, she called and said, "Daddy... 'the wrong side of the tracks' that's a real thing. There are really tracks in VA...and if you live on the wrong side, you really are on the bottom rung." We don't have tracks in Gig Harbor...but we have some snobs. Don't we? And snobbery can easily infiltrate the church. How are you doing loving those pew mates of yours who come from the other side of the tracks?

So, genuine agape is tough...and it's humble. And finally, Paul says, it's compassionate. "Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality...rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep." This is an important inside/outside verse. First, Paul addresses the insiders...the saints. That's us! Contribute to the needs of the saints... But the word "contribute" means more than to help financially...although it can mean that. The root word is actually "fellowship" which means that we enter into...we share in...the needs, the sufferings of our brothers and sisters in Jesus. This may mean making repairs on a widow's home, something one of our men's Lifegroups does regularly. Or giving a widow a ride to church. We have that need right now!

Or it could mean weeping together. We just celebrated Tom Walter's memorial service. I watched the church in action as they wrapped themselves around Ilean and the family, shouldering each other's grief and laughing at each other's stories. It was a sweet picture of this verse. I can't tell you how many times I've heard grieving Christians say, "I don't know how people do it without the Church!" And I can tell you...not as well.

We are to fellowship in the needs and sufferings of fellow saints...that's inwardly turned. But we are also called to show hospitality. To strangers. That's OUTWARD. I heard this week from someone who wants to know why we do so much that is focused on visitors and strangers. Things like "mugging" our

first time visitors and Alpha. They were disturbed that we were so outwardly focused. Well...read this verse. Part of what it means to "love genuinely" is to welcome strangers! In fact, that is one of the recurring themes in both the Old AND the New Testament. Hospitality toward outsiders.

Frankly, I think we've become a little inwardly focused as a congregation. Perhaps a little too comfortable with who we are...and not as interested in welcoming the stranger as we once did. And you know what that means? It means, we've forgotten what it feels like to be the stranger. There was a time when every one of us was a stranger here. Aren't you glad someone welcomed you? Jesus ALWAYS cared for the outsider...that's what genuine agape does. I think we need to revive that instinct that once distinguished us as a church. Our hospitality needs to be fanned back into flame.

Having said this, I have one more thing to say: as I look over Paul's list of what it means to be a healthy, loving body, I am reminded of my nickname for you. You know what it is? My Sweetheart Church. We aren't perfect; no church is. And we've had our hard times; every church does. In fact, we've been going through some tough things in recent weeks. But despite the difficulties, despite our flaws...Chapel Hill IS a Sweetheart church. You are loving. You are not snobs. You have been courageous. You are compassionate. As I look at this list, I don't feel like I have to say, "Start doing these things, Chapel Hill!" I feel like saying, "Keep it up, Chapel Hill!"

Yesterday/Friday morning was a big day in the Toone family. Our daughter Rachel was examined by our presbytery and approved for ordination as a Minister of the gospel in our denomination. It's surreal. I remember vividly back in December 1992... when we took our first church directory portrait as a new family of three...and Rachel's head was so wobbly we had to prop it up for the photo. And I remember baptizing her in this/the chapel in her little Scottish dress. And I have a 1000 other memories of the way this congregation has formed and shaped her into the woman she has become. It was never my aspiration that Rachel would be. I just wanted her to love God, love God's Church and love her family. But it turns out that God's Church...specifically, this church...loved her first...and loved her well. My Sweetheart church!

It's not that she didn't experience some tough times as a preacher's kid. As I said, we've had our moments. But in spite of those times, what she experienced here...in this church body...helped prepare her and call her to a life of ordained ministry. So... once again, my Sweetheart Church, THANK YOU for who you are. Thank you for the way you love. The way you have loved us...and the way you have loved thousands of others into the Kingdom. Now...keep it up, Chapel Hill!