

03 September 2023: Romans 12:9-21 (Proper 17)

In today's 2nd Reading, Paul writes a series of exhortations—strong advice on how Christians are to conduct themselves. Paul habitually urges those who read his letters to put into practical effect in all their relationships and environments, the actions, words, and thoughts that witness to the reality of Jesus in their lives. This morning we will concentrate on his first several appeals.

Paul begins: *Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good.* For the ancients, the emotions of love, while important, were not of first importance. Love primarily involves the will—one's intentions, one's desire for self and others. Paul urges Jesus-followers to practice genuine love. Genuine love is aimed at the welfare and joy of the other through which we receive blessing, fulfillment, and joy. Genuine love does not judge some as deserving love and others, because of things done or said, less worthy of God's love made real through us. God's grace sees beyond our faults, sins, and wounds. As followers of Jesus, the perfect embodiment of love, we ask for and practice his genuine love in our relationships and environments. God's love discerns the sin, yearns to heal the effects of sin, and helps the sinner turn from the ways of destruction to the way of salvation, all through grace. We are not to make a home for evil in the world; out of love, we *hold fast to what is good*, with everyone, everywhere. No exceptions.

Paul continues: *Love one another with mutual affection.* We all know actions speak louder than words, especially if our actions do not match our words. The command that we Christians love one another is irrefutable. John 13:34-35: *I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.* We are to love one another with *mutual affection*. In part this means when loved we reciprocate in kind. In case such thoughts arise—this does not mean that if we do not feel loved we are free to not love others. While we are children of God, we are not to be childish. To only receive love and not share love makes us greedy, immature, buckets of narcissism. As we gratefully accept love, love grows, compelling us to share love with others. If we are not growing in love, sharing God's love with others, we are not really receiving love.

Paul goes on: *outdo one another in showing honor.* Honoring someone else means we esteem them, admire them; we see their authenticity, their dignity as reflections of Christ. We express honor through admiration, reverence, even veneration. In our power-mad, greedy, exploiting world in which the undesirable are disposable and Truth is utilitarian, the honorable are simply dismissed as obstacles to profit, or sanctimonious fakes, or antiquated artifacts of a now dead morality. Not so in the Church. We honor one another because Christ dwells in each one, loves each one, yearns to be known by each one, has died and is risen for each one. Everyone matters to us because everyone matters to Christ. Christ honors us by his Incarnation, passion, cross and death, by his rising on the third day, by his continual presence. We honor one another and thereby honor Christ, in whom we all live and move and have our being. Paul writes, *outdo one another in showing honor.* This is akin to how Jesus responded to the question of how many times to forgive. Just do it. Showing honor is not a "tit-for-tat" deal: I'll honor you if you honor me. Do not wait to be honored; honor all your brothers and sisters in and for Christ to the best of your ability, with love, always.

We conclude with this: *Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.* Zeal is passionate enthusiasm, avid eagerness, intense fervor. Ardent is another synonym for zeal. Therefore, Paul is using a doublet to express the fiery, passionate commitment to which we are called. Again, as followers of Jesus we are to catch, demonstrate, and practice the inflamed, vehement love Jesus has for us and all creation. The truth is we become what we love. If we love Jesus, we will—his grace working in us—become more and more what he is. It is out of this passionate, eager, vehement love of Christ Jesus that we serve the Lord.

Blessing and honor, thanksgiving and praise, more than we can offer, more than we can conceive, be yours, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, by all angels, all mortals, all creatures, now and for ever. Amen.