

Romans 12: 9-21 "Genuine Love" Rev. Janet Chapman 8/30/20

Michael Sanders, Josh Jensen, Morgan & Meagan Malak, Annie Burke, Ivy Chapman, Frannie McNally, Josh Stanley, Debbie Nickell – just a handful of names that may sound familiar who were among the campers and counselors present when I directed summer church camp several years ago. On the first night of camp, the 40 or so present were invited to create a "camp covenant" that would govern their behavior toward one another during the course of the week. Suggestions like "listen while others are talking, respect the leaders, be kind, pick up after yourself," quickly filled the flip chart page. After the page was almost full, the room broke out in laughter when someone shouted, "No drama!" After everyone had signed their name to the page, it hung prominently before us to remind us of our boundaries.

Rochelle Stackhouse notes that Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome would function brilliantly as a group covenant for any gathering of people of faith. It is so packed with Christian ethics that scholars estimate at least 23 different imperatives could be unpacked in any one message and woe to the preacher who would attempt all 23. Summarizing them all demands that we revisit last Sunday's scripture, verses 1-8, which starts out, "Therefore, present your bodies as a living sacrifice to God who is your spiritual worship." Thus, whereas "no drama" might summarize a camp covenant, the call to "right worship" may serve as Paul's overarching focus. "Right worship," in Paul's mind, is both reasonable and bodily, both intellectually reflective and practically active. The list of instructions he provides establish a right worship of God, something that is to be done not just on Sunday mornings but 24/7, something that is not just done with our minds but with our whole being, body and soul. Every interaction we have is

to be guided by these core values outlined by Paul. It is a tall order and none of us will be successful all of the time so we take it one instance at a time, one moment at a time.

The first few words lay the groundwork, “let love be genuine,” that is love others authentically. In Tracy Kidder’s book, Mountains Beyond Mountains, Dr. Paul Farmer travels the world establishing clinics to treat chronic diseases like TB in areas of severe poverty and inadequate health care. In doing so, he deals with the medical establishment, various bureaucracies and local traditions. In each situation, Farmer approaches all people with a “hermeneutic of generosity,” which means he evaluates people’s actions from an assumption that their motives are good even if, at first glance, one might suspect the opposite. To treat people as the apostle encourages in our text is to hold to an underlying hermeneutic of generosity which is spawned out of genuine love. Paul names the behaviors that reflect such love. Some of you runners may know that the good distance runners don’t just play general messages in their minds like “Relax!” or “Stay loose!” while running. Instead, good runners play very specific messages over and over in their minds like “Let the lower lip sag!” or “Feel how loose my fingers are right now!” These very specific messages help their whole body to relax and stay loose. It is the same with Paul’s ideas for genuine Christ-like love in these verses. “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep” or “If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” and “do not repay evil for evil.” Of course, none of this endorses tolerating abusive strategies or dysfunctional relationships but instead invites us to think about and help meet others’ genuine needs, including the needs of those who do not like us or who are not like us.

This is where we often fall short – tolerance of those who are different or who have wronged us. A story that came out of the South African Truth & Reconciliation Commission reveals more of what Paul is speaking of here. A man confessed to shooting a young man and then laughing while he and his drunken secret police friends bound the young man’s body. 18 years later, he and the police returned to the young man’s home, dragged out the young man’s father and shot him in front of his wife, forcing her to watch as they dragged away his body. He confessed to both crimes. The horrified court sat in silence as one of the judges asked the wife, “What would you like to see done to this man who has committed these crimes?” Now both a grieving mother and widow, she said softly, “This man has taken away from me all I had! But he has not taken away all of my ability to love. I want him to gather up some of the dirt from where my husband was buried and then I want him to visit me twice a month.” In the legal court of justice, many complained that the man didn’t get what he deserved, but something happened there that was much greater than court justice. The woman showed the world the power of love which, in the Christian scheme of things, exceeds such forms of justice any day. Dwight Carlson, a lawyer and minister I knew in Selma, once told me that one of the most misnamed institutions in our society is the “criminal justice system.” In our legal system, justice is way too much to ask of our courts. We can give some money, punishment, a bit of retribution, but we can’t give you justice. How does financial compensation bring justice to a person whose child is murdered? What we need in our world is that biblical form of justice which turns the world’s injustice on its head. The prophets of old cried for “justice”, but it was a cry inspired by a God of love who understands that justice and love go hand in hand. Such

justice is measured in love, is realized by the practice of peace, and advocates for an equitable space for all.

Our basic human impulses, however, are to fight back – there is no denying that. We've all been there. Who hasn't been smacked in the cheek, assaulted with a nasty comment, or run over by a cheap shot... and not been tempted to exact some kind of revenge? Even the sweetest and gentlest of people have been known to turn ferocious if they run up against some serious pain or anguish caused by another's cruelty. If it can happen on the playground among 1st graders or in the hallways of high schools, it can certainly happen among adults who have a special knack for rationalizing behaviors. Fighting back and responding in-kind seem to be gut reactions when we are frightened or mistreated. Loving or praying for the persecutor is the last thing to come to mind. Shortly after the start of the Gulf War, the second time around, a group in Atlanta gathered to pray, sing, read scripture and pray some more. A 17 year old was in the group and in the course of the sentence prayers, he asked that God be with the women, old men, and children in Iraq who would be hurt or killed in the war. When it was over, a man in his mid-50's came over to the young man and said, "Are you on Saddam's side?" He said, "Uh, no sir." "Well, then you're praying for the wrong people."

The interesting thing about revenge, as Paul notes, is that it isn't ours to keep. If everything about you and me and our lives belongs to Christ, which is Paul's deepest understanding, then not only is revenge not our right or our possession to keep, but even the wrongs we suffer do not belong to us. We are not to hold onto these hurts as a basis for bitterness but they belong to Christ, so turn them over, relinquish them. And in case you are wondering where the strength comes from to live in such a way, to do what the young man at

the prayer session did, to do what the South African widowed mother did, remember that Paul had incredible confidence in the power of love. How else could he speak so compellingly in favor of blessing those who persecute us? Barbara Brown Taylor says, "The only way to conquer evil is to absorb it. Take it into yourself and disarm it. Neutralize its acids. Serve as a charcoal filter for its smog. Suck it up, put a straitjacket on it and turn it over to God, so that when you breathe out again the air is pure." There has been a whole lot of smog plaguing our lives lately, not just from fires, but from divisive political rhetoric, anger and frustration about the pandemic, protests against protests, financial insecurity, and uncertainties about the future. It is time to turn the whole mess over to God so we can again breathe in the pure air of a new future. Neutralize the evil with good, make love the filter through which you see and hear, and break the cycle of hate that so easily infects even the best of us. Living by this spirit of generosity, we will know and spread more effectively the kind of transformative justice which will bring our world closer to God's realm.