

Wesley United Methodist Church  
August 30, 2020  
Let Love Be Genuine  
Scripture: Romans 12:9-21  
Matthew 16:21-23

I read this week about Jack Eccles who is a “longtime Baptist pastor with two doctoral degrees. Even at the age of ninety-three, he is currently learning German and recently posted a sermon to YouTube. His wife of seventy years, Gerry, is the mother of their nine children. She was diagnosed with Alzheimer's in 2015 and lives in a nursing home in North Carolina. On March 12, when Dr. Eccles arrived as usual to spend much of the day with her, he was turned away because of the coronavirus pandemic.

“So he returned the next day with a suitcase of clothes, books, medications, and his computer. The facility had agreed to rent him a single room so he could care for Gerry. He has been there ever since. Wearing a mask and goggles, he feeds her three times a day, checks to be sure she gets her required forty ounces of liquid a day, and wipes drips so they don't stain her clothes. He positions Gerry's head and neck carefully to be sure she doesn't choke.

“Their profile in the Wall Street Journal is an inspiring story of love, family, and ministry. In it, Dr. Eccles explains his care for his wife simply: ‘We're married. I want to be with her. She took care of me for seventy years, and now it's my turn.’”<sup>i</sup>

I think we can all agree that this is an inspirational story of love. At the same time, it doesn't tell us about the tough times that they likely experienced during their lives. It doesn't tell us about the times when they were likely angry at each other, when they disagreed, when life felt hard. Those times do not in any way detract from their story but are simply a truth that Love is not as simple and uncomplicated as the images we often see in pictures or ads. Because the truth is that love can be hard work and the question is what we do when it is hard.

Paul wrote to people who lived under difficult circumstances and he is very specific about how to stay connected in love. Paul is not writing about romantic love here although what he says would apply to that as well. But he is writing about love as a verb, as a way of living, as a witness to our faith. He is specific. He doesn't just give us nice platitudes but he gives hard rules, advice, exhortations on what it is like to live a

life of love even when, and especially when, life is difficult and when it is tempting to respond with something other than love. This isn't just about being nice to the people who are nice to us. This is about how we respond in love to those who are not nice to us. This is about living a life of Christian love, a life that reflects God's love for us and our resulting love for each other.

In many respects, these words from Paul are like a covenant of behavior for how we live our lives as Christians. They tell us that as much as it is possible, as much as it is within our control, we should live in peace with all. You've heard me say this before but I always want to be clear, that there is nothing in Paul's words – or in our Bible – that tells us that we should allow others to abuse us or be violent toward us in any way. If it is at all possible, we should remove ourselves from those situations because loving another does not mean that we should allow them to continue to hurt us.

What it does mean is that we should not stoop to the same level. We should not repay evil with evil. Paul exhorts us, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." "Getting even" should not be part of the Christian repertoire of behavior.

There is a possibly apocryphal story told about Abraham Lincoln that says that when he was asked why he did not seek to destroy his enemies but showed them leniency instead, he replied, "Do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?" I say it is possibly apocryphal because the first attribution of this is many years after his death. This same quote is also attributed to Mark Twain, Martin Luther King Jr, and others including the Roman Emperor Sigismund who died in 1437. Regardless of who originally said it, it is clearly the message that Paul is promoting in his letter to the Romans which predates any of those credited with this saying.

Friends, these words are not just ancient words, but they are ones that we need to hear and heed today as well. Paul was writing to a church that was a very diverse community. It included both Jews and Gentiles. It included both people who were free and people who were slaves. It included both women and men. It included people who had power and people who had none. It would have been easy for it to become a community of division and conflict, which may be why Paul was so strong in his language to them, so firm in telling them about the higher and different standard to which they should be held, higher and different than the world around them.

We live in a country today where people are proclaiming “black lives matter” and the answering shout is often “blue lives matter”. We live in a country where a black person may be afraid for his or her life or the life of their children if they encounter the police or someone who thinks they are somewhere they “don’t belong” and we hear this countered by white people who actually believe that if you are not doing anything wrong, then there is nothing to fear. We live in a world where immigrant families are being detained and children are being separated from parents and a world where an equal cry is that there are legal ways to enter this country. We live in a country where following Hurricane Laura there will be huge devastation and damage and where recovery will take not days or weeks, but likely years. We live in a country where we debate whether wearing a mask is an act of love, an act of suppression, or a political statement. Into all of this, we are called to be agents of God’s love, not participants in hate, evil or violence of any kind.

In you spent any time during the past two weeks watching or reading about the Democratic and Republican National Conventions you saw the division that is so prevalent in our world. Three years ago, in response to activities that were happening then, Bishop Devadhar wrote these words, “We are witnessing a world of division and violence born out of closed minds and hearts.”<sup>ii</sup> He could have written those words today.

That’s the kind of division we see today. People at both conventions are convinced that they know what is best for our country and seem equally convinced that what the other side wants is to destroy our country. Depending upon your particular view, you may have also heard words that gave you hope that your side will prevail.

The question that I hear for us is how we respond to those who have a different opinion than ours. I firmly believe that we need to stand up for justice and that we need to name abuse and corruption and injustice when and where we see it, but I think that Paul is telling us that there is a right and a wrong way to do this.

While neither of them is perfect or free from their agendas, we have heard the former first lady and the current first lady both speak about this to some extent. I was intentional about watching both conventions because I want to hear for myself what is being said, while it is being said. Once again, we heard Michelle Obama tell us that

“When they Go Low, We Go High”. She has made it a practice of as Paul says to “not pay back anyone for their evil actions with evil actions but show respect for what everyone else believes is good.” She mostly manages to not stoop to name calling and bullying.

This week, I also heard Melania Trump offer one way of responding to division among us. She said, “Like all of you, I have reflected on the racial unrest in our country. It is a harsh reality that we are not proud of parts of our history. ... Our diverse and storied history is what makes our country strong, and yet we still have so much to learn from one another. With that in mind, I'd like to call on the citizens of this country to take a moment, pause, and look at things from all perspectives. I urge people to come together in a civil manner, so we can work and live up to our standard American ideals.”

Now, I am well aware that both Michelle and Melania were promoting a particular political party and candidate, and there are goals behind their words, but their words still offer some practical advice for us. They remind us that even in the middle of a heated presidential campaign we can try to treat each other with civility. It is one thing that we can do. When the rhetoric gets fierce, we do not need to indulge in name calling, bullying, insults and similar behaviors just because others are doing so. We can and should show a different way. We can speak clearly and factually but without denigrating another person. We can attempt to understand what the other person is saying, trying to understand their perspective and potentially opening the way for civil dialogue.

When we do this, we may interrupt the cycle. We can avoid descending into a cycle of reciprocal violence. We can show that there is such a thing as good in our world; good that can and will make a difference.

In a post on Facebook, author Anne Lamott wrote: “I wish I had my Sunday School kids today, during the devastation of the pandemic and the terrifying images of murder and protest. I would tell that I am lost, too, but from the wise old pinnacle of my years, I would assure them that we can trust God no matter how things look and how long things take. The pain inside us and right in front of us is nothing compared to the power of love that surrounds us.”<sup>iii</sup>

In a world that today often seems dark and scary, sometimes we need to be reminded that love is truly a power that can overcome evil. The best way to remind

ourselves and others of this is to live it out. It's not easy. If it were, everyone would do it. No one ever said that following Jesus would be easy. It's not. But as Anne Lamott points out, we can trust God to help us, to walk with us, to guide us in this journey. "The pain inside us and right in front of us is nothing compared to the power of love that surrounds us."

As Christians we are called to live our lives in a way that is different than much of the world around us. It can be easy for us to become comfortable with the world and to lose our identity as a distinctive people, as a community that lives by a different standard. It is important for us to faithfully follow Jesus, rather than becoming comfortable with our world. It is important for us to live this life of genuine love, a love that we know because of God's love for us. If we fail to do so, we run the risk of making it impossible to tell the difference between the church and any other social organization. Our goal as Christians is to love, and to lift each other up. Paul exhorts us to refuse to sink to evil's level but instead to give good to those who most need to know about God's love and may only come to know of God's love because of the love that we show to someone else.

Let us pray, using today, a prayer written by Rev. Steve Garnaas-Holmes.

Let us pray: "God, may my love be genuine. May I let go of what is evil in me, and open myself to what is good. By your Spirit in me, May I truly love others: not just to tolerate them but to honor them.

Give me your zeal, your energy, the true desire to serve you. Give me the faith to rejoice with hope, to be patient in suffering, and to persevere in prayer. Help me take the opportunities I will have today to contribute to the needs of those around me ... to extend hospitality to strangers ... to bless those who oppose me – to bless and not to curse them.

I am mindful of those who rejoice, and I rejoice with them. I am mindful of those who weep, and I weep with them. May I be present for them today. Give me your grace to live this day in harmony with others. ... Give me grace to not repay evil for evil, but to focus on what is good for the sake of all. Give me grace to live peaceably with all. Give me your grace to feed the hungry even if they oppose me, to give drink to the thirsty even if I do not like them.

I pray that I will not be overcome by evil, but that I may overcome evil with good, by the grace of your love in me. Amen.”<sup>iv</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Denison, Jim Dr. “The Daily Article” 8/25/20

<sup>ii</sup> Devadhar, Sudarshana Bishop. *Together in Christ*, Sept. 1, 2017 quoted in my sermon of Sept. 3<sup>rd</sup>.

<sup>iii</sup> Lamott, Anne. Facebook May 31, 2020, Quoted in “Inward/Outward” a Project of Church of the Savior in Washington DC. Copyright 2020.

<sup>iv</sup> Steve Garnaas-Holmes, *Unfolding Light* [www.unfoldinglight.net](http://www.unfoldinglight.net) August 26, 2020