

The 16th Sunday after Pentecost

Text: Romans 12:9-21

⁹Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. ¹⁰Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. ¹¹Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. ¹²Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. ¹³Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. ¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. ¹⁶Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. ¹⁷Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. ¹⁸If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. ¹⁹Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. ²⁰On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." ²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Theme: Genuine Love for Both Friends and Enemies

Jesus often chided the pharisees for their hypocrisy. "Hypocrite" is a Greek word that means actor. An actor plays the role of a person, that he is not in real life. The pharisees acted like they loved God, but they really loved themselves. The love that they seemed to show God was nothing more than an act.

However, such hypocrisy is also possible in our love for each other. Verse 9 is translated, "*Let love be genuine.*" Literally translated it says, "*Let love not be hypocritical.*" It is possible to talk about love and to seem to be loving on the outside when it is all show. We have probably all encountered a salesman who is like that. They seem to take a genuine interest in you; however, it is all just a show in order to make the sale. In these verses Paul writes about a love that is not just in words or even in deeds, but one that comes straight from the heart.

I. God desires that our love is for both our friends and enemies.

It is easy to love our friends. In verse 11 Paul writes, "*Love one another with brotherly affection.*" That word for "love" is "philadelphia," which means brotherly love. Brotherly love is the deep affection that we have for those who are closest to us. It is the love between brothers and sisters. They might fight and argue among themselves, but deep down they would do anything for each other. (Sometimes you have to get really deep.) It is the love between child and parent. The parent would rather have harm come to them rather than their children. It can be the love between a husband and wife when they are best friends. Paul uses the word "agape" in Ephesians 5, when he writes that the wife respects her husband and he loves her as himself. It is the love between best friends. You would do anything for each other. It is the love between Christians. As a congregation we see each other as brothers and sisters in Christ.

None of these relationships is perfect in this fallen world. There are times when we are selfish and times when we fight and argue. But our hearts are still affectionate toward each other. We are friends. We are brothers and sisters. There is a bond between us that nothing can break. As Paul writes, we honor each other. We help those who are in need. We show hospitality by inviting each

other into our homes. When they are happy, we rejoice. When they cry, we cry with them.

This kind of love is shown when we call or send a card to someone who is down. We might give money to someone in need or help them to find a job. This love is not always easy. Sometimes it involves sacrifice. However, it is something that we do joyfully for those who are close to us. We like them, so it is natural that our love for them comes right from the heart.

The tougher kind of love is for our enemies. Paul has many remarks about this kind of love in these verses. In verse 14 he writes, *“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.* In verse 17 he writes, *“repay no one evil for evil.”* In verse 19 he writes, *“Never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God.”* In verse 20 we read, *“If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.”* Finally in verse 21 Paul writes, *“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”*

Love for our enemies is one of God’s most difficult commandments. What is most difficult is that we cannot grit out teeth while we are forgiving them, blessing them or doing good to them. God commands that our love for our enemies is sincere. It has to be without hypocrisy. In Matthew 18 Jesus tells the parable of the unmerciful servant. A man who owes the king millions of dollars is forgiven that debt, but immediately he throws another man into prison who owes him a few thousand dollars. The king becomes so enraged that he reinstates the man’s original debt and orders that he is tortured until he pays the full debt in full. The most difficult words of the parable are when Jesus says, *“This is how my heavenly Father will treat you, unless you forgive each other **from the heart.**”* We might say the words, “I forgive you,” but sometimes we don’t want to mean them.

It is very hard to forgive our enemies from the heart. It is hard to turn the other cheek and not become angry when that one is struck also. We would rather repay evil for evil, and take revenge ourselves rather than waiting for God. It is hard to be sympathetic to our enemies and desire to help them when they are in need.

But that is what God requires of us. In the sermon on the mount Jesus said, *“Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well...Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? (Mt 5)* In the Lord’s Prayer, He teaches us to pray, *“And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”*

To be honest, none of us is that perfect. We can’t even love our friends from the heart all the time. We especially fail at loving our enemies, praying for them, and forgiving them from the heart.

II. Where do we find the strength to love all people from the heart?

It is found in God’s love for us. In today’s Old Testament lesson, Jeremiah had enemies who were out to destroy him, but he had hope that God would deliver him from the hand of the wicked. He didn’t need to take vengeance on them or repay them with evil. He put that in God’s hand. (Jer 15:15-21) In our text Paul writes in verse 12, *“Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.”* As Christians we live in hope that God will never leave us or forsake us. We know that

He hears our cries for help.

We think of Jesus who did not lash out when false charges were brought up against Him. He did not strike back when He was beaten and mocked. When He was nailed to the cross, His first words were, *“Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”* His patient suffering brought about our reconciliation. We were God’s enemies, but as Paul writes earlier in this letter, *“When we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son.”* (Rm 5:10) Even though we sinned against Him, God still loved us from the heart. He showed it by giving His dearest treasure for our salvation. In Christ, our sins have been forgiven, and we have gone from being God’s enemies to His beloved children. He now looks at us as His sons and daughters in Christ. So we can confess with David in Psalm 56, *“In God I trust; I will not be afraid. What can mortal man do to me?”* (Psalm 56:4) When we look back and see God’s grace to us, and we look forward confident of His mercy, we find strength to love even those who are unlovable.

We also find strength in God’s promise to turn the hearts of our enemies. Paul writes in verse 20, *“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.”* The end of that verse seems odd. What Paul means is that the good that we do to our enemies might bring them to repentance and turn their hearts toward us. Our love for our enemies might end up making them our friends. The best example of this is when Jesus was on the cross. His love caused ones of the thieves next to Him to repent. It also caused the centurion in charge of the crucifixion to confess that Jesus was the Son of God. His love for His enemies turned many of their hearts to repent of the harm they did to Him and to confess them as His Savior.

That is really the basis of our Christian Gospel. We don’t convert people by preaching the hell fire, but God’s love in Jesus Christ. It is the Gospel and not the law that changes hearts. It has the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. This has also made its mark in how our western society operates. In the Iraq war this difference between Islam and Christianity is dramatic. Al Quaida attempts to win people to their side either by coercion or seeking revenge, while we have tried to attract allies by doing good things for them. As Christians we do good those who have wronged us, and we forgive them from the heart, because we know that our good deeds for them, might bring a change of heart to them that will make them brothers and sisters in Christ. Our good deeds can change our enemies into our friends.

The Christian command to love everyone, even our enemies from the heart, seems like a tall order. It is. It is impossible to have genuine, sacrificial love for all people on our own. That is why we thank God for His love for us even when we were His enemies. He gives us hope that His love is stronger than anything that anyone will do to us, and His love is strong enough to turn the hearts of our enemies and make them our friends.

May God give us that faith in His unconditional love for us, that we may love one another as He has loved us. Amen.

***Pastor Don Hougard Benediction Lutheran Church
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