

“Let Love Be Genuine”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Romans 12: 9-21

What does it mean to you to love another person? This week, my wife, Debbie, and I celebrated our 21st-wedding anniversary. There’s no doubt the best decision I’ve made in my life was to ask Debbie to marry me – and thankfully she said yes! And as any married couple will tell you, when two people embark on a shared journey together, they will experience moments of wonderful joy, as well as times of great challenge. The mere sentiment of love is not enough to face those times. It requires the full breadth of sacrificial love for another to grow closer through all that life brings you.

What do we expect of others whom we love? Do we believe that if we show love to someone else, it ought to be reciprocated in a similar way? Do we have a higher expectation for those we are closest to – family, friends, co-workers – than we do for strangers? Do we put limits on our love for others, based on how they’ve treated us in the past, or our impressions of them, or what others have said about them? What are our expectations when it comes to loving others?

I wonder if too often we get our own expectations confused with what are God’s expectations – both of us as individuals, and of us as the church. Sometimes, we have to step back, gain a bit more perspective, and discern what God expects of us as disciples of his Son, Jesus Christ.

In Paul’s Letter to the Romans, we hear the apostle sharing what God’s expectations are for us as followers of Christ. After eleven chapters of laying out the revelation of God’s love in Jesus Christ, Paul moves in chapter twelve to how we are to live in the light of that love. As we talked about last Sunday, we are “to present our bodies as a living sacrifice,” to be “transformed by the renewing of our minds, so we might discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect” (12:1-2).

And in the passage we have read this morning, Paul centers on the tension between good and evil, love and hate. “Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good” (12:9). Love is not meant to be skin-deep; it must permeate our whole selves. It must not stop at the surface when we are done with a project to feed the needy, for instance; it must penetrate our hearts and souls and minds, causing us to pray, to work, to lobby for the needs of the less-fortunate so that justice might prevail. Love must be genuine; for if it is, then good will prevail, and hate will not.

In encouraging his listeners, Paul then states ways to show how God expects us to model genuine love: outdo each other in honoring and helping one another; be ardent and strong in spirit; meet suffering with patience; help those who are in need; and welcome the stranger (12:10-13). These actions are the natural extension of love

leading one's heart, and they reflect the same love God showed the world in the form of Jesus Christ his Son.

In the remainder of this passage, Paul is concerned over how the church will respond to those who persecute Christians. We read throughout Acts and the Epistles how those who affirmed their faith in Jesus Christ were often the objects of hate and persecution by those in authority. And Paul is careful to make a distinction between how Christians are to respond to those who commit evil against them.

While he states very clearly to "hate what is evil," he does not say repay evil with evil. Instead, Paul says, "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them . . . Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God" (12:14,17,19). These words reflect the teachings of Jesus, especially in the Beatitudes, as he taught not to bring violence upon those who hate you, but show love instead.

Paul then quotes directly Proverbs 25 when he says: "If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads" (12:20). To truly follow Jesus, you must be able to put away your feelings of revenge or retribution, and instead offer help and compassion to those who seek to hurt or work against you.

What does God expect from us as disciples of Jesus Christ? How do we work to get our expectations a bit more in-line with God's expectations? And how do these shared expectations lead us to grow in spiritual nurture and evangelism?

I believe God expects us to model the love we have first been shown in Jesus Christ. That love is not to be reserved for only those who are the easiest to love. That love is to be extended to the stranger, the enemy, the other. When we truly embody God's love for us in Jesus Christ, then we are faithfully living as an open, caring community. Our love must be more than words - it must be visible in our acts of kindness, compassion, and advocacy for all who are on the margins, or are suffering greatly from life's crushing load.

What we have witnessed in South Texas these last several days is unimaginable to most of us. Four feet of rain falling from the sky - four feet - is unprecedented. It will take weeks to truly grasp the extent of damage that Hurricane Harvey has caused in Houston and throughout southeastern Texas. And in the midst of this catastrophe, there has been remarkable evidence of extending genuine love to one another. The following was written by the Editors of the [Charlotte Observer](#) on Friday, and it spoke deeply to me and Paul's call to let love be genuine. They write:

Let's talk about the chain. It was a human chain, on Interstate 10 in Houston on Tuesday afternoon. A black woman holding the hand of a white man holding the hand of a Latino man, then more than a dozen others.

Moments before, they were strangers, until an elderly man's SUV got swept up in floodwaters on the highway. Somebody said: "Let's form a chain." So they did, finding strength together against the waters, then reaching the man's vehicle, then opening the door to pull him to safety.

Let's talk about the millennials. A couple of them, Joe Looke and Daniel Webb, were watching the early devastation from Hurricane Harvey when they

decided they wanted to do more than watch. So they found a dry spot at a Houston shopping center and put up a sign asking for donations.

Soon, as the Houston Chronicle reported, people came by with toilet paper and bottles of water. One man brought an armful of pizzas. Within hours, they had filled more than 30 SUVs with items to take to local shelters.

Let's not talk, for a few moments, about our disagreements. Let's not talk about politics or hate or climate change policy or whether someone was enough of a leader this week. Those are legitimate debates, and we will surely have them soon enough.

Let's talk about those who did lead this week, in their own way, no matter what you expect of them, no matter what you think of them. Let's talk about the mosques throughout the Houston area that opened their doors for shelter without anyone asking them to. Let's talk about the businessmen who decided to look past their bottom line.

One of them, Jim McIngvale, opened the doors to his Houston-area furniture emporium, so that the suddenly homeless could have a place to stay and sleep. When the 400-plus people straggled in, Jim told them they should use the furniture on display. He's not sure what he'll do with that furniture when everything gets back to normal. "To hell with profits," he said. Let's talk about that.

Let's talk about the law enforcement officers who risked their lives again and again for rescues. Let's talk about the government officials turned shelter volunteers. And let's also talk about the journalists - the supposed enemies of the people.

One of them, Brandi Smith of Houston's KHOU, abandoned a live report to flag down sheriff's deputies when she saw water filling the cab of a man's tractor trailer. Another, from CNN, was preparing to go on air when he instead ran to a ravine with his cameraman to save a man floating in his truck. They, like so many others, rushed into danger with one thought in mind: help.

Yes, there were people who exploited this week's tragedy. There will always be those people among us - in tragedies and every other day - and many of them will get away with it. It's up to us whether we want to spend our time worrying about being taken advantage of, or deciding that it's worth the risk to help others who need it.

So let's talk about the chain. The human chain. There were several of them this week - hands grabbing hands in floodwaters, because that's what the moment demanded. No one asked if that hand they gripped was here illegally, or if that hand pushed a button to vote (for someone in particular). No one asked if the person needing saving could have avoided their situation in the first place.

It was simply people, kind and courageous and willing to sacrifice, because other people needed them.

Let's talk about that this week. Let's try to remember it when this week is over (<http://www.charlotteobserver.com/opinion/editorials/article170416862.html>).

Let love be genuine. Hate what is evil. Hold fast to what is good.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.