
It Starts with Love

Last week I started a conversation with you about belief, and the different ways we believe in this congregation. I shared with you some of the variety of feedback that I have received over the past year or so—feedback on my preaching. So I want to pick up on that conversation today as we reflect together on the passage from Paul’s Letter to the Romans that Elaine read for us this morning.

One of the themes in the feedback I’ve received about my preaching has been that some of you have heard a scolding or moralistic tone, reminiscent of the preaching of old. Some of you have said that it sounds like I am telling you to pull up your socks, shape up, because your current practice of Christian faith is somehow insufficient or lacking.

And then today we have list of ethical injunctions—do’s and don’ts—from Paul, Paul haranguing the church in Rome!

Perhaps I should feel like I am in good company with Paul! Now it’s probably true that some of you who have a reaction to what you hear as a moralizing tone in my preaching are also not great fans of the Apostle Paul, and for some of the same reasons. Paul is often I think misunderstood as a cranky theologian who moved the church away

from the simplicity and openness of Jesus’ teaching, and toward something more rule-bound and rigorous.

So this is the task I have before in the next few minutes. To try to redeem Paul from some of the ways I believe he has been mischaracterized; and in the process to perhaps redeem my preaching for some of you as well.

A couple of things that are important to understand about Paul’s list of ethical injunctions here in Chapter 12 of his letter to the Romans. First of all, we’re in Chapter 12 of a sixteen chapter letter; Paul has said a lot of things before he gets to this list of do’s and don’ts—it’s nearer the end of his letter than the beginning. The second thing to notice is that almost the first word on this list is “love”: let love be genuine.

It starts with love. A lot of what Paul has said up to this point has to do with love. It has to do with God’s love for us, and how that love is shown to us, is made real to us. For Paul, God’s love is made known to us in the story of Jesus: in God’s sending the Son Jesus to be with us, and then in Jesus’ death on a cross. In Chapter 5, Paul writes “God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.”

God shows his love by holding nothing back, including the Son; God pours everything out, pours everything into us, even before we have given any thought to God. It starts with love.

But here's the thing to remember: God's love is not mere sentiment; it's much, much more than a sentiment. God's love isn't just a feeling; it takes form and shape as costly, sacrificial action. God doesn't just reach out and offer us a hug; God goes to hell and back, to suffering and death and beyond, to show us that there is no place we can go where God does not go with us. This is a fierce, powerful, take-on-all-comers, kind of love. God loves us with this kind of love, all before we have given any thought to God.

And that's where our passage for today comes in. Knowing that we are loved like this, knowing all that God has done for us, coming to the astonishing realization that God would do this for us before we have given any thought to God—only then does Paul start to tell us how we should live in response to God's extraordinary, death-defeating love for us.

Paul tells us that we have been adopted by God, and have become members of the family of Christ, and so there ought to be a family resemblance, a resemblance between our behaviour towards one another and God's behaviour towards us.

It starts with love: "Let love be genuine ... Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour." And the list goes on: "Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you ... weep with those who

weep ... Live in harmony with one another ... live peaceably with all."

All of these are actions which Paul says God has already done for us.

God loved us first; God honoured and hallowed human life, and given us tremendous gifts which we often have misused; God provided for our needs, and sought to bring us into loving relationship even before we had given any thought to God. God in Jesus did not retaliate against those who persecuted him; God in Jesus experienced the full measure of human suffering, and solidarity with those who weep. God in Jesus showed us how to love one another across every kind of difference.

These are the family values of the family that we have been adopted into; the values that should mark our behaviour, too.

My husband Don has told about a time when he was growing up—so still a young person—and he did something he ought not to have done—as we all do from time to time—and he was preparing to go home to his parents to face the music.

Don says that what he feared most was not his father's anger, or wrath. What he feared was a look in his father's eyes—an expression of disappointment or sadness. That look was what broke young Don's heart.

It was a look that said, "I love you so much, and I have done everything I could do to be the best parent I could be for you; I've held nothing back. Remember how much your mother and I love you,

and let your actions be a reflection of that.”

It starts—and ends—with love.

That’s basically what Paul is trying to tell us in this passage. God has loved us without limit; as children of God, and members of Jesus’ family we are expected to do likewise.

We’re called to honour the presence of children, even when that is sometimes disruptive; we’re called to welcome strangers, and bring them into the fold. We’re called to help meet one another’s material needs; we’re called to walk with those who suffer, to be as Christ to them. We’re called to love one another across our differences. We’re even called to put up with preachy pastors. Why? Because God has done all this—and more—for us.

Let us pray:¹

Gracious God, during this time of worship give all of us the eyes to see what a great gift you have given us in giving us yourself in Jesus Christ. We who were far off have been brought near. We who were alienated from your love have been embraced by your saving love. We who didn’t really know who we were have been named and claimed by you.

And after we have worshipped, after we’ve said what we need to say to you and have tried to listen to what you have to say to us, send us forth, confident that you go with us, sure that we have been given the gifts we need to be faithful to you in thought, word, and deed. Amen.

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¹ Will Willimon, Pulpit Resource.