

August 30, 2020

Romans 12: 9-21

Rev. Larry Brown - Powell United Methodist Church  
“It’s Our Job”

I’m beginning with a confession today. I confess that I’ve been a little too hard in my critique of the programming that’s on The Hallmark Channel. Maybe you watch The Hallmark Channel or you have someone close to you who watches it. If you don’t know, the made-for-tv movies on Hallmark are almost exclusively romantic dramas. They are all about love, and through the years I’ve not been overly kind with my criticism of these shows, mostly because the plots are so predictable. The locations may change, the actors get switched up, it might be at Christmas time or some other time of the year, but the storyline is always the same. There is little to no intrigue, no real suspense, no wondering what’s going to happen. I’ve made the comment that when you’ve seen one Hallmark movie you’ve seen them all. The story comes out the same every time: a couple meets, they fall in love, some difficulty arises that pulls them apart, they discover that despite all odds they really do love each other, then they get back together to renew their commitment, and just like all other feel-good stories, they live happily ever after. I’m feeling a bit confessional about my criticism toward The Hallmark Channel because, let’s face it, the world probably needs more feel-good stories right now. Whether it’s the storms in the Gulf or the storms in our culture around race, policing, and guns, we know things don’t always turn out well, and the weight of it all in the middle of a global pandemic can weary the soul. So what if we know how the story is going to end, as long as the end is filled with love. If the conclusion of the story brings us together, and if we’ve survived hardship and struggle, and if we come out on the other side committed to being there for one another, this might just be what the world needs now. Some of you may already be singing this song in your heads because we remember the hit song in 1965 by Burt Bacharach, “What the World Needs Now” is love, sweet love. But you know, that’s true. The world, our world, my world, your world, does need love. It always has and it always will. Where we’re going now is turning away from thinking about love only in the context of a romantic movie. What we’re talking about now is the kind of love that involves more than the heart. This is love that impacts our thinking and the words we say. This is a love that determines how we live. The kind of love we’re reflecting on now is the kind of love that Jesus embodied and it’s the kind of love the apostle, Paul, described when he wrote to the early Christians, “Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good.” (Romans 12:9) This kind of love isn’t a feeling. This love is a foundation block of our faith and it involves action and decision making. Let me come back to the storms I just mentioned. As the ongoing assessment of the damage in the aftermath of the hurricanes continues, responding to those impacted by the storm requires an empathy and compassion that connects to the love human beings have for each other. First responders and others who assist with the emergency are doing this not because they are emotionally in love but because there is a deep level of care that flows from a spirit which connects us all by way of the human experience. Emotion, no matter how right and good it is, is not the most appropriate response to the issues of race in our culture. Attitudes, judgments, and systems of governing must be grounded in a comprehensive love, which is to say that the value of every life matters, despite the color of our skin, the passion of our politics, the level of our income, or the country or culture in which we’ve been raised. Let love be genuine, and our scripture for today gets very specific on what that kind of love looks like.

Many of us are aware that in the ancient Greek world there were different words used for love. The word Paul uses here when he says “let love be genuine” is the word, *agape*. *Agape* love is deep and comprehensive. *Agape* love is unconditional, which means the context doesn’t matter. *Agape* love involves every ounce of our being, and this means *agape* love shapes our values, our commitments, our judgments about others, and our passions. As Christians we tend to think of *agape* love in a positive light, as if to say that when *agape* love is present it is always right and good. Paul thought about it differently. He says we must work to be sure *agape* is genuine because sometimes, according to Paul, it’s not. Any kind of love can go wrong, even *agape* love. Here’s what I mean. If we love money or wealth, so much so that it shapes all of our goals and our efforts, then this kind of *agape* is potentially destructive, putting one’s self interest first at all costs. When we love anything more than our love for God the result can pull us away from what Christ is asking of us and moves us farther away from faithfulness. This is what the Gospel of John is talking about when we go to the 3rd chapter of John and read that the “light has come into the world, and the people loved darkness rather than the light...” (John 3:19) Paul is clear about what kind of *agape* love he’s talking about when he goes on to describe what this love looks like in our life together. Being welcoming, gracious, and remaining concerned about others is essential to the kind of *agape* love that strengthens community instead of breaking it down. The concern we’re addressing today isn’t whether or not we love but to decide what kind of *agape* love motivates and

shapes us. If what I love most creates attitudes or practices that are not in line with God's purposes, Paul says we have missed the mark. What takes hold of us must be genuine and in that way it will be possible for the world to know we are Christians by our love.

Alice Walker is an African American author most known for her book, "The Color Purple," which is a story about black women in the south during the 1930s. Among many quotable statements from Walker is the one she makes about the fourth commandment about the Sabbath. She says, "Anybody can observe the Sabbath. Keeping it holy surely involves all the rest of the week." We get that, don't we? We can talk about loving God but it's the way we live that out and how we treat others that reflects the depth to which that love makes us who we are. We are encouraged to worship each week in this way but the call of our faith is to make love genuine in all we do and say outside the sanctuary. This, then, is where our scripture for today takes us. As we live through the coming days of this week, how does our deep love of God and our commitment to Jesus shape what we think and what we do?

It's helpful to know that being a part of the church is more than just worshipping together. Our congregation provides many ways to deepen our love and to express that love in our lives. One way I celebrate that this morning is by lifting up the Letters of Hope program that a number of our congregation are involved in. For months, numbers of people have made the commitment to write letters to those who are incarcerated to remind them that they are not alone and the folks like us, people they've never met, are praying for them. The letters are a testimony to agape love, and the action of expressing that love through a personal note is a concrete expression of the genuine love of Jesus for others.

We're not all involved in writing the letter of hope, and that's OK. The point is, where is God calling you and me to extend agape love into the world? I think that opportunity is given to us each day. I invite us to think about this. It takes both practice and intentionality, so be mindful of the moments in your life where some act or expression on your part offers the true love of God for others. To help with this, I suggest a simple way to evaluate how this works in the way we live. Whether it be today or some other day this week, when we are responding to something we see on the news or something we see in the world around us ask, "What deep love am I reflecting with my words or actions. Is God in what I'm about to do or say?" Just to say it's my opinion or my politics or my personality isn't enough. Let our love be genuinely seated in God's love for us in Jesus. In this way we will be people of light, not just on Sabbath but every day and in every way.