

8 October 2017

**Intentional Care**  
Romans 12:9-21

At his last supper with his disciples, in the Gospel of John's account, Jesus gives them several chapters' worth of final instructions, including this verse from John 13:35: *By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.* This is not an instruction to go out and love the world. He says that in other places, but here he's simply telling his followers to love *each other*. He seems to picture the church that would follow him as a place that outsiders would look at with amazement, saying, "Look at how much those people love each other!" Whatever else the church might be or do, that mutual love should be the first thing that people notice.

I should point out one more thing about that. The very fact that Jesus expects the church's love to be remarkable indicates that he expects the church to be made up of very different people – that is, people that you wouldn't normally expect to love each other. Nobody is surprised that all the members of a hobby club get along with each other. I was once a part of a book club made up entirely of white, middle-aged, well-educated men who voted for Democrats. There was never any real disharmony in our discussions. We may have been as boring as dishwater, and we were, but we all got along. But Jesus expects people to look at the church and say, "Get a load of that group! How do those people even stand to be in the same room? But they obviously love each other!" And, it definitely started out that way. The early church consisted of poor people and rich people; freemen and slaves; Gentiles and Pharisees, educated and illiterate. Eventually, yes, we divided up into our own groups a little, but at least for a while they were one, odd couples held together by love. How did that happen? Well, as is often the case, Jesus laid out the goal, the vision to strive for, but left the specifics on how to get there for his followers to piece together. People like Paul.

Our scripture today is from Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 12, verses 9-21.

*<sup>9</sup>Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; <sup>10</sup>love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. <sup>11</sup>Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. <sup>12</sup>Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.*

*<sup>13</sup>Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.*

*<sup>14</sup>Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. <sup>15</sup>Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. <sup>16</sup>Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. <sup>17</sup>Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. <sup>18</sup>If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. <sup>19</sup>Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' <sup>20</sup>No, '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.' <sup>21</sup>Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

I don't necessarily think of Paul as a good *example* of how to conduct relationships – but there's actually a great deal of wisdom in here, whether he always took his own advice or not. There's more in this passage than we have time for in one sermon, but let's look at a few points. Verse

10: *outdo one another in showing honor*. Notice that Paul starts not with how we *feel* about others in the church, but how we behave toward them. This is a key point. You see, we don't get to decide how we feel about someone; that's spontaneous. But what Paul recognizes is that we can choose to treat others with respect, no matter how irritating they are, and over time, that respectful attitude shapes our feelings as well. If we treat people with honor, eventually it sinks in that they deserve it. This is not a revolutionary idea. In fact, it's what we used to call ... oh, what's that term again? ... good manners. That's what manners are about: treating others with honor. Letting them finish what they're saying before jumping in. Eating the eggplant parmesan that they serve you, and saying thank you, just as if it were real food. Not gossiping about people. Ever. But "manners" sounds fusty, so let's stick with Paul: *outdo one another in showing respect*. It's basic stuff, but it's a great start.

Then a few more verses – 14, 17, and 19: *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*. If someone does not treat you with honor, don't retaliate. Instead, bless them. Take the high ground (that is, *what is noble in the sight of all*) and if it bothers you that they aren't suffering the consequences of their meanness, leave it in God's hands. If that person has really done you wrong, God knows it and can deal with it appropriately. Now, God might deal with them differently than we would like. We who are counting on God forgiving our sins should probably be prepared for the possibility that other sinners may receive the same grace, but either way, the point is to leave consequences in God's hands. And then, one of my favorite verses about church relationships, verse 18: *If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all*. The thing I love about that is its practical realism. No, it may not be possible to live at peace with everyone. We may not be able to resolve every difference and restore every broken relationship, because that only happens when all parties agree to do so. Just don't let the rift be your fault. Do all you can to live at peace with others, and when you've done that, whether your peace is returned or not, move on.

But the profound heart of the passage is verse 15: *Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep*. When we can do this, then we've got it. When we are happy because another is happy, then we have put their well-being before our own, and that's what love looks like. And when we share another's sadness, that too is love. Just last week here at church I witnessed an encounter between two people who were each grieving a separate grief, and when they had made that connection, one of them said simply, "Let's be sad together," and both of them got teary-eyed, and both of them smiled. Did you get that? That's what church should look like. *This is how everyone should know that you are my followers*, Christ said, *when you love each other like that*.

So, as we talk about the foundational purposes of the church this month, I think it's fair to say that one of them is to care for each other with respect and love. That hasn't always been the church's reputation, of course. In the popular mind remains that image of the backbiting, gossipy church lady. (By the way, this is not only a sexist, but an inaccurate, stereotype. I've been a guy long enough to be able to say with certainty that nobody gossips more than we do.) We all know stories of churches torn apart by conflict, of pastors and lay people who stir up dissension and controversy everywhere they go – either as some sort of sick compulsion or as a hobby. And, of course, we have the example of our own denomination, which every four years puts on that spectacular display of relational dysfunction that we call "General Conference."

So we Christians are not generally thought of in terms of how much we love each other. But that's unfortunate, because I think our negative reputation is deceptive. I think we're better at it than most people think. There's a reason that on the insert in this week's bulletin I asked you first to think about the ways that the church has cared for you, before asking about our failures: because in my experience, the former far outweighs the latter. The problem is that thousands of quiet prayers and cards and gifts of love get forgotten after just one incident of malicious gossip. (By the way, there's a reason I keep bringing up gossip: because Paul does. Paul loves to list sins, and gossip makes the top five of every list. You've heard of the "Antichrist"? Well, gossip is the Antichurch.) As I was saying, though, I think the church quietly lives up to Christ's vision more than it doesn't. Have you ever known a church that didn't have its own collection of strays? People who for one reason or another were marginalized in society but who found a wholehearted welcome at church, regardless of their mental illness or disability or addiction or hygiene or appearance or number of ill-behaved dogs that they bring to worship? Dude, it happens all the time. It's what we do. And I'll add that this particular congregation does it better than most. Our Lake Care ministry is brilliant. The number of people in our congregation who are deeply involved in caring for those who can't make to church themselves is outstanding. And in our active Accessibility Team we have people who are intensely focused on making sure that everyone who steps or wheels in our doors has a place here. We're a church that loves. And while in the larger church there have certainly been awful examples of churches focused on hatred of difference or protecting the powerful, by and large I think this is one purpose that the church has held on to pretty well.

Have you seen the movie *Lars and the Real Girl*? Yeah, well if you have not, that was a bad choice. Let me show you a scene. No spoilers, but the background is this: Bianca, whom Lars loves, is dying, and he wakes up one morning and finds that his Lutheran church has arrived.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_fll\\_f19YTk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_fll_f19YTk)

So let me conclude by summarizing what we've learned today on how to be a church known for its remarkable love. Outdo one another in showing honor. Bless those who persecute you. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep. Sit with people when tragedy strikes. Bring casseroles.

In recent years, as the numerical decline of the church has increasingly thrown church leadership into a panic, there has been a lot of emphasis on getting out there and bringing more people in. We've got to build our numbers, or we'll die. We've done marketing surveys, trained pastors in evangelism, changed our worship to be more attractive, started serving frappuchinos during coffee hour, and lots of other things. I'll talk about evangelism next week. But this week raises an important question: suppose we do all that and get a lot of new people to come to our church. If they don't find us to be the church that Jesus described – a motley assortment of differing people who nevertheless love each other – why would they ever come back? I wouldn't.