

The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
August 30-31, 2014
Romans 12:9-21

“Christians in the Capital: Love in Action”

I'll state the obvious here: where did summer go? Labor Day weekend is the unofficial end of the summer season, and we return to work and school from summer travels and vacation. It is a time of transition, and that is also true in our life as the Body of Christ here at St. John's. Today is the last Sunday of our summer worship schedule, so we return to our usual two services starting next Sunday. This will be Kickoff Sunday on September 7 when Christian education classes begin for all ages at 9:30 am. Today also brings to a close our summer preaching series, “Christians in the Capital,” based on the appointed Epistle lessons from Paul's letter to the Romans. We've approached this series from the perspective that Paul wrote his letter to Christians who were living in the capital city of the Roman Empire, and that is what we are today also. We are Christians living in the shadow of our nation's capital here outside of Washington, D.C. And so today we close out this series focusing on what are the signs of Christ in the life of the believer. These are signs or marks of Christ's love at work in our individual lives and our life together as the Body of Christ. The theme for today's message is “Love in Action.” May the Lord's rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus' sake.

If ever there is a need for love in action in our world, it is now. Earlier this month, together with people from our congregation and members of sister congregations throughout the Southeastern District, I attended our district's annual “Tending the Flame” conference in Richmond. The keynote speaker was a man named Reggie McNeal and as I write in the September newsletter (which you will receive today), his presentation was based on his book, *Get Off Your Donkey! Help Somebody and Help Yourself* (Baker Books, 2013). The book is a brief but compelling call for Christians to put Christ's love into action in daily life. Like the Good Samaritan did in that parable which Jesus told (Luke 10:25-37), we are to get down off our donkey, roll up our sleeves and do good to others in Jesus' Name regardless of who they are. Reggie McNeal is a very funny man and made all of us laugh, which was a good thing because the harsh reality of the Christian Church in America today is anything but funny. All indicators point out that the Church is in decline. Like every other institution in today's culture, the Christian Church, regardless of denomination or affiliation, is under intense scrutiny from a very skeptical public. The culture around us has shifted from a church-based and church-friendly environment to one that may not be just skeptical but downright hostile. Reggie McNeal's point, simply put, is this: the Christian Church in twenty-first century America is going to have to serve its way back into our culture. We have to get beyond the B's that the world thinks we are absorbed in and how we usually measure our own “success” in ministry: bodies in the pews (attendance), buildings that come own us, and budgets that often dominate our thinking and meetings. It's a new day out there, and the world is looking to see from us love in action that is concerned not just about the 3B's inside the church, but about real-life needs in the community around us. Know that St. John's Church Council and congregational leaders are wrestling with all of this as we look to the future.

So, what does love in action look like? That is what Paul the apostle writes about in today's Epistle lesson. These are concrete signs and marks in the life of Christ's people that spring up from hearts that have received Christ's love. These aren't things that you can force people to do; it doesn't work that way. And these are not things that come by way of guilt; it doesn't work that way, either. Both coercion and guilt may work for a time, but they won't last. And it's not authentic, but fake, and people can smell that a mile away. Take up your worship bulletin and let's read together what love in action looks like from that Epistle lesson in Romans 12:9-21.

It's interesting to note that Paul uses two different words in verses 9 and 10 for love. In verse 9, the word is ἀγάπη, this is the word used in Scripture to describe God's self-giving, sacrificial love for us – love that knows no boundaries or limits. But in verse 10, Paul uses a different word (φιλόστοργοι) that denotes strong family affection. In other words, Paul is saying that love for our brothers and sisters in the faith is not in the flowery abstract (“I love all people in Christ”), but in the nitty-gritty concrete: love for Christ's people who are sitting right in front or behind or beside me; the ones who try my patience and get on my nerves. Yes, if Jesus loved me enough that he would give his life for me, then I can learn to love my fellow brothers and sisters.

Look at what love in action is: genuine love and abhorring what is evil. Note that it says “what” is evil, not “who” is evil. Genuine love in Christ attaches itself to the good in a person while detesting the evil in him or her. There cannot be love for what is evil, but love can see beneath the evil that which is good. Showing honor, not flagging in zeal, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord, rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, constant in prayer, contributing to the needs of the saints, showing hospitality – this is what the world needs to see in us. It is one thing to be persecuted for the faith, but it is quite another to bless those who persecute. The original word that describes this is εὐλόγεῖτε, where we get our word “eulogy,” literally “good words.” When we experience setbacks or tribulations for the sake of Christ, what kind of words do we use? Are they good words that bless others, even those may be behind the setback or tribulation? **“Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.”** It is a rather easy thing to weep and commiserate with someone in calamity, but it is far more difficult to rejoice with someone and not be envious. Paul calls us to live with humility, and not think more of ourselves than we ought (Romans 5:5; 2 Corinthians 13:11; Philippians 2:2, 4:2). **“Repay no one evil for evil... do what is honorable in the sight of all... live peaceably with all... never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God”** (Matthew 5:43-44; 1 Corinthians 13:5, 6; 1 Thessalonians 5:15; 1 Peter 3:9). And yet in traffic, how often we really want to avenge ourselves, especially with the jerk who cut us off! Here's the thing: when we leave no room for the wrath of God, we make room for the devil (Ephesians 4:27). What would happen if we really began to live out this command from the Lord? Would our lives be different? Would the lives of people around us be different? I suspect they would. The “burning coals” which a person feels when good is returned for evil may be that Spirit-led means which brings that person to repentance.

It all comes down to this: **“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”** This is what Jesus has done for us: overcoming the evil we have done and the good we have failed to do by giving his life as that once-for-all sacrifice for our sins upon the cross. He has literally loved us to death, and how he calls us to love others as he has loved us. It's love in action for Labor Day and every day. Amen.