

“Labors Of Love”

Romans 12:9-21

Let love be genuine; abhor that which is evil,

hold fast to what is good;

with the love that befits a brotherhood / sisterhood

be affectionate to one another,

outdo one another in showing honor.

Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.

Rejoice in hope, show endurance in afflictions,

persevere in prayer.

Minister to the needs of the saints;

practice hospitality with enthusiasm.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.

Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty,

but keep company with the lowly;

do not be wise in your own estimation.

Return no one evil for evil,

but plan to lead an honest life in the sight of all.

If it is possible, that is, so far as it depends on you,

live peaceably with all.

Never avenge yourselves, beloved,

but leave room to God's wrath for it is written,

“Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”

Rather, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them;

if they are thirsty, give them something to drink;

by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.”

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Labors Of Love

Romans 12:9-21

September 3, 2023

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I.

The purpose of today's sermon is two-fold: to offer my thanks to all of you, and to seek a reality check. Beginning tomorrow, I will be away for three weeks. While admittedly not the best timing, with the start of the new year and all kinds of things gearing back up, it is important that I step away for a spell and dial down the intensity a bit in order to rediscover a sense of myself which is distinct from my professional role. As I told the Session Monday night, it is not a matter of being "burned out" but, rather, of being "full up."

I am also a little tired of hearing myself talk; certainly to all of you and others around me, but also hearing my own voice in my head. In addition to this, it is Labor Day Weekend which affords us an excellent opportunity to consider our own labors, those for whom we labor, and the One who calls us to such labors.

II.

Given all this, such a unique moment and perspective has reminded me of a scripture reading I often use at funerals, 1 Corinthians 3:9-16:

According to the grace of God, our foundation has been laid. Let each person take care how they build upon it. For no other foundation can any one lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

In last Sunday's sermon, I drew an analogy to channel surfing, a habit to which I am prone. When I asked for an informal poll seeking to confirm I was not alone in this, I admit to being a bit shocked to learn that only one of you have a similar habit or, even, a tendency (or so you say). Which, I will admit, was a bit of a reality check. It is always a humbling to realize that others do not see the world in the same way, or share your perspective. Which is why, today, I feel it important to ask *you* to give *me* a reality check about Jesus Christ; which is our foundation, laid according to the grace of God.

III.

In last's Sunday's sermon I also mentioned that our church is applying for a "Use Variance" in order to erect a new digital sign. One of the arguments we presented is that such a sign would allow us to engage with the community so as to accurately and fully present ourselves:

"Whereas almost every other business provides a product which is understood by all without much consideration required (insurance is insurance, food is food, gas is gas) the type of product this particular church is "selling" requires a re-imagining of what a church might be; especially in an age when so many are not seeking the "goods and services" a church traditionally provides. The proposed new sign would allow us to 'shift the paradigm.'"

By now, I am sure, most of you have realized that our church is a little bit different than what most *have* experienced or, in all probability, *will* experience. So much so, that it is my belief that we occupy only the smallest sliver on the very broad scale or spectrum of what a church can be.

IV.

People involve themselves in a church for a variety of reasons: spiritual, social/connectional, cultural, political, environmental, educational, familial, moral or ethical, habitual, and/or rational. While vastly different and distinct each one of these reasons, remarkably, arises from the very same source: Jesus Christ. Which is interesting, or even odd, but in no way unexpected. Everyone sees Jesus Christ in their own way and, to a certain extent, in such a way as to suit their own purposes or perspectives; at least at the onset.

Said another way, *every* church talks about Jesus Christ in some way, shape or form; or, purports to do so at the very least. While merely anecdotal, I am willing to wager that you can tell much about a particular church based solely on the title most in use; be it "Jesus" (emphasizing his humanity), "Christ" (emphasizing his divinity), or "Jesus Christ" (to acknowledge both). While I, personally, am in the "Jesus" camp, today I am purposely using "Jesus Christ."

Here is where the reality check comes in. I assume *you* know that when I say, "Jesus" what I am also saying is, "Jesus, who is *the* Christ." Right?!?!?!?!
WAIT!!! Do not answer that just yet.

V.

First, allow me reframe the question by telling you a story. While I was born and raised in a Presbyterian church, it was quite evangelical in nature (very concerned with being “saved” and saving souls of others) as well as conservative (both socially and politically), all the while being quite focused on sin and morality (one’s own and others). Suffice to say, they used the title, “Christ” almost exclusively. All of which is fine.

Turns out, though, it just wasn’t my thing. For years I felt myself to be a fish out of water and, frankly, could not for the life of me figure out why. Then, in the 9th grade, I travelled to Shoulderblade, Kentucky.

VI.

Yes, that is an actual place (look it up) set deep in the heart of the hills and hollers of Appalachia. I went as part of a “Mission Trip” to help paint and repair a small day-care center. As part of the experience we visited some of the homes and people who live there. The poverty was simply *shocking*: dirt floors, a blanket for a door, sewage in the creek not 10 feet from the house where kids with no shoes were running around and playing.

The people, though, were as astoundingly kind and gracious as they were astonishingly poor and destitute. Not only did it rock my world, it rocked my soul. Still does, to this day. Upon my return home, and to my church, I realized I had some things which I needed to sort out in my head and my heart; particularly, as they related to my developing faith. All of which I am still doing *to this day*; and, especially, on *this day*.

VII.

Which, I will tell you, has been something of an interesting, if not difficult journey; which anyone who has ever known me (particularly in my youth and college days) can surely attest. Slowly though, as I moved through the ordination process, seminary, my first churches, and well into my time here in Canton, I began to work it out.

Thankfully, my friend and colleague, the Rev. Dr. Laurie McKnight, helped me encapsulate the point at which I felt I had finally arrived. An extremely effective and compassionate Hospice Chaplain for many years, Laurie related

to me an experience she once had with a doctor while trying to support a person's end of life decisions. After explaining these to the doctor, who was clearly uncomfortable with the decisions this person was making, the doctor said, "I'm not sure I understand." Laurie simply replied, "I'm not sure you need to."

VIII.

So here it is: there is a great deal about Jesus Christ that I simply do not understand; and I'm not sure I need to. Whereas, personally, this is appropriate, as a minister it creates certain challenges. Namely, that there are things all of you may feel the need to understand about Jesus Christ that I do not. Which is fine, we can work that out; whatever these might be. Not only is that a fun and worthy challenge, it has also yielded what I would consider to be a very healthy, dynamic, diverse, authentic and amazingly effective church.

To be clear, though, this is not to say I am in *any* way ambivalent about the cross as a means of salvation, the status of souls (particularly those in my charge), the reality of sin, broader church policy, our moral and ethical responsibilities, or the way our faith informs politics, social agenda and environmental consciousness. As it regards these things, I simply do not believe I *need* to be equivocal or fully resolved in my understanding.

IX.

What I *am* fully resolved about, however, is a thorough understanding of the labors of love with which we have been charged, a full awareness of the ones for whom we labor, and an unshakeable certainty about the One who calls us to such labors. That is, Jesus the Christ: the foundation which has been laid for us according to the grace of God.

Today's scripture reading from Romans 12 finds Paul articulating to the faithful, both then and now, how we are to build on such a foundation with the labors of love he articulates:

Abhor that which is evil, hold fast to what is good; be affectionate to one another, outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, show endurance in afflictions, persevere in prayer. Minister to those in need; practice hospitality with *enthusiasm*. Bless those who persecute you. Rejoice with those who rejoice,

weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty. Keep company with the lowly; do not be wise in our own estimation. Return no one evil for evil. Plan to lead an honest life in the sight of all. So far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Never avenge yourselves, if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. And, finally, all these are to be done with a love which is *genuine*. Meaning, we're not messing around here.

X.

45 years ago, down there in Shoulderblade KY, my eyes were opened to the world around me; and I shall never, *ever* forgot those people who opened them. In fact, one might say I see them every day right here in our *own* community; and, in a different but equally vivid way, I see them in all of you, the church, who are astoundingly kind and gracious.

The church is not a group of do-gooders which seeks to *effect* change from the *outside* in as a bandaid on a sick, suffering, and sinful world. Instead, we are the body of Christ...Jesus *the* Christ, seeking to *allow* change to take place from the *inside* out as the means of delivery for the cure to *all* those things. We are a real-world, physical and spiritual place which is, at once, fully human and ever-fully divine all the time. Divine not to the point of completeness, but divine in a growing ampleness.

Just as there are a variety of ways to understand Jesus Christ, there are even more ways to express a faith in Jesus Christ, and bring the Good News (Gospel) of Jesus Christ to the world in order to effect the cure, the solution, the answer, we understand and believe him to be. Whereas many churches undertake an assortment of programs and policies, we seem to have settled on a different course: labors of love.

XI.

Not just any labors of love, however; those done *specifically* in service to Jesus Christ. At this point many would rightly ask how the reason *why* we offer our labors of love could make any possible difference? Is not the outcome the very same? My answer, absolutely not. While I cannot prove this to you, there is proof. While I cannot show this to you, you can certainly discover it for yourself. While it may not make any sense, it makes all the

sense in the world. The difference (or the difference maker) is, quite simply, Jesus Christ.

All too often good people resign themselves to the belief they cannot change the world, but we can bring change to our little corner of it. The truth, though, is the *only* way to change the world is to begin to change our little corner of it; beginning, first, with changing ourselves, and in allowing ourselves to *be* changed... from the *inside* out.

XII.

It isn't so much that programs and policies do not work or are not effective; they most certainly can be. My experience has shown me, though, that what works *much* better and is even *more* effect (not to mention a whole lot of fun) are our labors of love done in the name of Jesus Christ who then, mystically, amplifies them, builds on them, and spreads them around in a ways that may appear random, or even chaotic, but given enough time and distance you can see how these labors of love miraculously, magically, and mystically all work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to God's purpose (Romans 8:28). Because, suffice to say, Jesus Christ is one who is *not* messing around here.

XIII.

While I certainly appreciate a reality check that confirms *you* know that when *I* say, "Jesus" what I am *also* saying is, "Jesus, who is *the* Christ," the more important reality check is how each of *you* know Jesus Christ. Not just in your heart and your head, but in your labors of love. *Right?!?!?!?!?*

Given the unique moment that is today, as Linda and I begin a few weeks off, the overwhelming perspective we have is one of gratitude for all of you and the labors of love you offer to our world, to our community, and to us. While it might have saved us a great deal of time this morning if I had just said this at the onset of the sermon, the point I am really trying to make here is that actions speak louder than words. Even small actions, labors and gifts of love; perhaps especially so. Like these cupcakes, which Linda baked, and I frosted. Our small labor of love to say, thank you.

To quote Forrest Gump and, at least for the next three weeks, that's all I have to say about that. Amen.