

WORDS TO LIVE BY Romans 9:12-21

Kelly Boyte Brill
Avon Lake UCC
31 August 2014

Who does Paul think he is? Doling out a to-do list like that. There are 13 imperatives in just the first paragraph of this passage. Let love be genuine, hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good. Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit...and on and on it goes. How are we supposed to remember all of those instructions? Who does Paul think he is?

This month many parents in this church family have dropped their freshmen sons and daughters off at college. On the way to Athens and Kent and Columbus and Bowling Green and Wooster, there have been reminders. "Remember all the things we've taught you. Go to class. Get to know your professors. Sign up for some extracurricular activities. Be nice to your roommate no matter whether you're friends or not." Then, as the car is unloaded and the room is getting set up, the parent remembers a few more instructions: "Do your laundry more than once per semester. Don't keep open containers of food in your room." And when the parents are driving home, they think of all of the things they forgot to say. They send text after text, they can't help themselves; their hearts are full of love and hopes and dreams.

Who does Paul think he is? He's someone who loves the church so much he can't help himself. He wants the best for these new communities. He's been writing to them about the grace of God and he says, "Now it's time for you to live it." Live it out. Show that you believe by living differently than those around you. It sounds like a laundry list, an impossible list, but it's an outpouring of love. "I want you to be the kind of person who

makes the most of college,” parents tell their child. “I want you to be well-rounded, healthy, happy, productive.” And Paul says to the church, “I want you to love each other. I want people to know you are Christians by your love. Put what you believe into practice.” It’s not that the church community should be perfect; we’re people, we’re imperfect people. But we are called to set the bar high in our relationships with one another.

Let love be genuine...love one another with mutual affection...Asking a minister to preach a sermon about love is like going to a restaurant and asking the chef, “Just cook me something good.” It’s so vague, so undefined. So let’s get down to the nitty-gritty. What does it mean to be in loving community with one another? What does it really mean in our day-to-day lives?

Several years ago I was meeting with a family to plan a funeral. I was with two or three children and their spouses; it was their mother who had just died. I had known the mother; she was a member of the church. No one around the church liked her much, to be honest with you. She would say strange things, she would act slightly inappropriately; I wasn’t aware that she had any close friends. I was curious to see what her children would say about her. They started talking to me, very tentatively at first, just telling me the facts of her life, and then they grew more comfortable, and finally, one of them said, “Let’s face it; none of us really liked Mom all that much. We loved her, but she was hard to like.” They spoke the truth in love, and because they did, I did, too, at the funeral, saying, “Some people are hard to love but we’re called to love them anyway.” It’s what it means to be in loving community with one another. We show honor and respect, not just towards people that are easy to love, not just towards people we’d like to have in our circle of friends, but to everyone, especially those who challenge us the most.

“Live in harmony with one another”, Paul says, but how do we put that into practice? In every family I know, in every community I know, there are people who just get on each other’s nerves. Sibling rivalry is a storyline that runs through the Bible, and, chances are, it’s a thread that runs through almost every family represented in this room today. There are lots of prodigal sons and daughters; there are even more resentful older siblings. There is the family member who makes it big, the one to whom success comes easily, the one parents tend to mention first and most. And then there’s the black sheep, the rebel, the one that takes the path less traveled. There’s the sibling who stays home and takes care of the elderly parents, and then there’s the one who swoops in for respite care, perhaps writing a few checks, and then goes home. In all of these relationships there’s stress and tension, and yes, love. “Live in harmony with one another,” Paul says, but it’s not easy, is it? Not in our families, and not in the church family all the time, either. Yet “if it is possible,” Paul says, “so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”

Why is it that we so naturally notice those qualities in others that bug us, and tend to overlook the characteristics of generosity and kindness? What we focus on shapes our reality. In this room today there are no perfect people, but there are 200+ people, each of whom is bearing the light of Christ. There are 200+ people, each of whom has a story worth telling, something unique to teach, something to bring forth into the world without whom the world would be a poorer place. Honoring one another means honoring our individual stories.

Are there people you just find difficult to like? They haven’t done anything wrong, but they just rub you the wrong way. There was a woman like that in a church I served previously. She was very rigid, intent on following all of the rules, whether they made

sense or not, and she called it to my attention every time I was doing something that she thought wasn't quite the way it should be. I didn't like the way I felt about her, I wasn't proud of it, but when she called, I bristled; I knew there'd be a criticism. A few years pass, nothing much changes, until one weekend we're together at a retreat, and I happen to be in her small group. As we're discussing a biblical passage, and answering some questions about how this passage makes us feel, and what it reminds us of, she begins talking about her childhood which included abuse by her father. Lightbulbs went on in my mind. There's a reason she acts the way she does. Of course there is. It's part of her story. No wonder she cares so much about people following the rules. She lived with someone who didn't, and to devastating consequence. Our stories make us who we are. When we know one another's stories, it's easier for us to show love.

Several years ago, a popular movie aired around Christmas time called "Love Actually". Set in England, the movie explores the different ways that love takes shape in our relationship. In the opening scene, Hugh Grant's character says that whenever he's depressed, he imagines the arrival section at London's Heathrow Airport. There, love seems uncomplicated as people receive and embrace the ones they love. As he reflects on this he adds, "When the planes hit the Twin Towers, as far as I know, none of the phone calls from the people on board were messages of hate or revenge. They were all messages of love."

We know how important love is. We know that it is the key to relationships. We know it's what gives meaning to life. And we all live in the hope that our lives will be filled with love. Why is it so difficult to put love into practice? We all begin relationships truly wanting to love one another, yet we struggle day to day to express that love to our

partners. We love our children and grandchildren, we love our siblings and parents, but we become so easily frustrated with them.

Maybe we need help with love. Maybe we need to realize that we, ourselves, are not the source of love, but merely the channel through which God's love can flow.

Many years ago, this church established a pastoral fund. We did so at the recommendation of one of our members whose previous church had a pastoral fund. It's been a wonderful gift to many members. People donate to it, sometimes throughout the year, sometimes when they have received an unexpected gift, or when they're celebrating something. Sometimes at the time of a death in the family they'll make a donation in honor of their loved one. We often direct our Christmas offering to the Pastoral Fund. Then when there are times of crisis, I'm able to use those funds to help. We've helped members when they've experienced house fires, extended periods of unemployment, unexpected medical bills. We've used it to help with the cost of counseling. Whenever I am thanked for a gift from the Pastoral Fund, I say, "I'm just the messenger. This is a gift from the whole church." I want people to know that the Pastoral Fund is a way that we can, as Paul says in this passage, support one another with mutual affection, rejoicing with those who rejoice, weeping with those who weep. It is as a church family that we do these things.

When we find it difficult to love, perhaps something within us is blocking the love God is trying to pour through us. Perhaps we feel unworthy of that love ourselves, perhaps we feel resentful that we're being asked to share. When we can work through those obstacles, we'll discover that being used by God is the highest purpose for our lives; it is the most satisfying way to live. Ask the Habitat volunteers how working on the house this summer made them feel.

Friends, these are words to live by. I want to close by reading you this passage from the Message version of the Bible.

⁹⁻¹⁰ Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle.

¹¹⁻¹³ Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant. Don't quit in hard times; pray all the harder. Help needy Christians; be inventive in hospitality.

¹⁴⁻¹⁶ Bless your enemies; no cursing under your breath. Laugh with your happy friends when they're happy; share tears when they're down. Get along with each other; don't be stuck-up. Make friends with nobodies; don't be the great somebody.

¹⁷⁻¹⁹ Don't hit back; discover beauty in everyone. If you've got it in you, get along with everybody. Don't insist on getting even; that's not for you to do. "I'll do the judging," says God. "I'll take care of it."

²⁰⁻²¹ Our Scriptures tell us that if you see your enemy hungry, go buy that person lunch, or if he's thirsty, get him a drink. Your generosity will surprise him with goodness. Don't let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good.

Let us pray. Holy God, you've set a high standard for us. Help us to be the conduit of your love in everything we do, wherever we go. Show us how to love those people who are the most challenging for us to like. And thank you for loving us, and giving us the possibility of more meaningful days and years and lives. Amen.