

Genuine
The Reverend Dr. Sandy Selby
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Romans 12:9-18,21

9 Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; 10 love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. 11 Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. 12 Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. 13 Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. 14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. 16 Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. 17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. 18 If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.
This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

Yesterday morning, shortly before Pastor Jon called to ask if I could fill in today, I listened to a video recording from Sister Joan Chittister of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie. In the video, she gave us a few questions for reflection, based on the Rule that St. Benedict wrote 1,500 years ago, a Rule that is still being followed today by the Benedictine community. The first question Sister Joan raised for our reflection was this: “How do I engage in a life well lived?” It’s a question that’s important for us, every day, as individuals. And it’s a question that’s important for us, as a community of faith: “How do we engage, as the Body of Christ, in a life well lived?” It’s an appropriate question on this second Sunday of the Stewardship season here at Westminster Presbyterian Church.

Today’s gospel lesson from the lectionary, and the passage from Romans chosen by Pastor Jon, provide the foundation for that life well lived, in the Great Commandment of Jesus, and in Paul’s exhortation to the Christians in Rome, telling them how that Great Commandment is to be lived out in the daily life of the Body of Christ, especially during times of challenge, conflict, and uncertainty—as was the case for the early Christians in Rome, and certainly for us, today.

The lesson from Matthew takes place in a time of significant tension. It’s the Monday of what we call Holy Week. Jesus had entered Jerusalem the prior day to acclamations of “Hosanna!” from the people lining the streets. He went on to further alienate the already threatened religious authorities by going to the Temple and clearing out the moneychangers. With all of this, the religious authorities have had it. They directly challenge Jesus’ authority, and issue a series of tests to try to trick him into blasphemy. In today’s lesson, a lawyer asks Jesus, “which of the commandments is greatest?” The lawyer isn’t asking Jesus to choose among the Ten Commandments; he is asking him to choose among the 613 commandments (including the Ten Commandments) that are in the Old Testament books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus, 248 of which say “do this!” and 365 of which (one for every day of the year!) say, “don’t do that!”

Jesus names two of those 613 commandments as the greatest. The first is from the 6th chapter of Deuteronomy: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” The second is from the 19th chapter of Leviticus: “you shall

love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus goes on to say that everything else, the laws and the prophets, “hang on,” depend upon, these two commandments.

The first of the two commandments that Jesus names is known as the *Shema Yisrael*, which is central to Jewish liturgy and life. Today, on the doorposts of many Jewish homes is a Mezuzah, a decorative case that contains the words of Deuteronomy 6:4-5: “Hear O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” The *Shema* is the statement of the life purpose to which God calls each of us, individually and as a community. To love God with our whole being, and to live out that love of God with love for our neighbor, is the central purpose of human existence. It is God’s will for each of us.

Viktor Frankl, the Jewish psychiatrist from Vienna who was sent to the concentration camp in Auschwitz, speaks of this in his book, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, that he wrote in 1945, shortly after he was liberated. When Frankl was sent to Auschwitz, he hid in his coat his prize possession, his life’s work, the manuscript of his first book, which was ready for publication. He writes:

[upon arrival at Auschwitz] I had to surrender my clothes and in turn inherited the worn-out rags of an inmate who had already been sent to the gas chamber immediately after his arrival at the Auschwitz railway station. Instead of the many pages of my manuscript, I found in a pocket of the newly acquired coat one single page torn out of a Hebrew prayer book, containing the most important Jewish prayer, *Shema Yisrael*. How should I have interpreted such a ‘coincidence’ other than as a challenge to live my thoughts instead of merely putting them on paper?¹

For Frankl, his manuscript, his work, was no longer his central life purpose. His purpose, his source of meaning was contained in the *Shema*, loving God with all his heart, and then living out that love of God through love for his neighbor. Frankl writes, “The salvation of [a human being] is through love and in love.”² That is God’s will, God’s plan, for each of us.

That’s what Jesus told the lawyer just four days before he was crucified. Nearly thirty years later, Paul told the Christians in Rome what the Great Commandment of love for God and neighbor meant for them, as they sought to live as an alternative community of hospitality, equality, love, and peace within the very challenging context of the Roman Empire. The first eleven chapters of Paul’s letter describe the abundant grace of God that surrounds and fills God’s people. The 12th chapter is the “so what.” Paul writes, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:1-2).

And what is the will of God? It is, says Paul, to “Let love be genuine.” This genuine love is the true expression of our faith that the grace of God will empower us in all circumstances through the Holy Spirit.

¹ Viktor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning* (New York: Pocket Books, 1984), 138-139.

² Frankl, 57.

“Let love be genuine.” What does that look like? Paul gives us a list, which I paraphrase, of the qualities through which genuine love is manifested in our lives, and in our community:

- goodness
- love for one another
- service
- hope
- patience
- perseverance in prayer
- hospitality
- empathy
- harmonious living
- peace

That’s quite a list! Who can possibly live that way? Well, we all can. Every one of us has within us the capacity for genuine love, and for the capacities that spring from it, because every one of us is made in the image of the God who is pure love. We all have that capacity for love within us, by our very nature. If we “let go, and let God,” as the saying goes, we will tap into God’s wellspring of genuine love, and bring that love into the world in ways both great and small.

We are called, as Paul says earlier, “to present our bodies [in other words, our whole selves] as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God.” That is what Stewardship is about: the offering of our whole selves, of all we have, to the God who, indeed, gave us all that we have in the first place. We make that offering out of genuine love. With God’s help, we express our love of God through love for our neighbor, with goodness, love, service, hope, patience, perseverance in prayer, hospitality, empathy, harmonious living, and peace.

That is the life well lived!

Amen.