

Romans 12:1-13

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Evie Macway

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Let Love Be Genuine

This passage from Romans has a special place in my heart. It was my Presbyterian pastor father's favorite Biblical text. I remember him saying this more than once in sermons he preached. He was a larger than life, big man who would fill the room with his presence and personality and who loved to preach, much more the extrovert than I am. He would preach on what called to him, and I believe this passage called to him often. Unbeknownst to me I was receiving my earliest lessons in preaching as a regular recipient of his sermons and for that I am grateful.

He passed away almost 28 years ago now. I do not recall ever asking him why this was his favorite passage so I have been left to speculate, given my memories of him as a pastor and as a father. And of course I have speculated.

I have always liked Romans. It feels like such a forthright and direct book. Romans is full of rich, complex passages to ponder and this is one of the best. The introduction to the book of Romans in my Oxford Annotated New Revised Standard Version Bible states, "Paul's letter to the Romans is the longest, weightiest, and subsequently the most influential of all his correspondence. It conveys the full richness of Paul's experience of Christ as well as the full maturity of his thought."¹ In Romans we get seasoned reflections and instruction from a man of deep faith and conviction.

Biblical scholars often divide Romans into two parts. The first eleven chapters are considered Paul's theological explanation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. What is Christ's message? In these chapters Paul talks about God's saving grace through Christ, God's judgment for our sin and yet the fact that we are justified, set right with God through our faith, and the affirmation that this salvation is for all people.

It is in this first portion of Paul's letter to the Romans that we find the powerful words of assurance that are often read at memorial services and funerals, "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, distress, persecution, famine,...? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us...neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:31-39) For me this passage is the gospel in a nutshell -nothing can separate us from the love of God we know in Christ.

¹ *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, The Letter of Paul to the Romans, New Testament, pg. 208.

When we come to chapter 12 the focus of the writing shifts. The rest of the letter to the Romans, chapters 12-15 is a series of ethical exhortations. As one commentator puts it, “with 12:1 Paul introduces new style and content as he brings the story of Christ’s redeeming presence and love to bear on the life of believers in tangible and practical ways.”²

We have the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. We have the foundation. We know who we are and where we stand in the eyes of God. That is clear. Now what are we going to do about it?

“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. Do not be conformed to this world, but by 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) Go all in. Before that phrase was popular.

I did a Google search on “all in” and it came up with several interesting links. ‘All In’ has been used as the title of episodes of several popular TV series: CSI, Suits etc. Apparently it is the name of a professional wrestling event. And it is also of course, maybe the original use of the phrase, a wager in the game of poker when a player puts their entire stakes on the line. All in.

All this some what flippant use aside, I think the phrase does capture fairly well the sense of Paul’s message here. Paul of course says it much better.

Ours is a faith that requires, but also graciously includes our whole beings. This is an all in deal. It is an invitation, not a demand. Notice in the first verse, “I appeal to you brothers and sisters, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice...” But if we do, if we take the invitation, it will take our all, body, mind, heart, soul as we work to discern and do the will of God. We will be all in.

These verses though are not just about the personal - our own ‘all in’ with God as we follow Jesus Christ. Paul masterfully weaves these verses to remind us that we as a community of faith are also part of a larger ‘all in’. If God requires us to be ‘all in’, body, mind, spirit, soul, with all the, shall we say, idiosyncracies of this person that we are, it should not surprise us that God also calls us together as a church, the body of Christ, all of us, with our different, as Paul puts it, “gifts according to the grace given us” to be part of a larger ‘all in’. He lists some of the gifts to remind us. We are not all the same. We are not meant to be all the same. And yet all contribute to the body. We do not know how God may use the person that we are, the person next to

² Elizabeth Shively, Commentary on Romans 12:1-8,
http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2101

us in the pew, nor the community to which we commit ourselves. We truly wonder sometimes. But that is not really our worry.

This brings us to the last few verses of this reading. I said at the beginning of the sermon that I speculate as to why this passage was my father's favorite. I have come to believe that these last few verses are the reason why. I think he tried, the the best of his ability to live these verses.

We are called to be 'all in' with our faith, on a personal level, all of ourselves, and on a community level, part of a larger all in that calls us to be a vital part of God's 'all in', a community of faith. Now we may come to question why, 'why would you want me God?' 'And why would you want him, her or rhem?' So far are we from who you would have us be.

But that is not really ours to worry about either. Set your mind instead on this. This, this is what we are called to do and be. This is what 'all in' looks like:

"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, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers."

If the passage I quoted earlier from Romans, 'nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord' is the gospel, the good news of our faith, in a nutshell then this, these verses are our response to that gracious good news, in a nutshell. (In a nutshell was one of my father's favorite phrases) This is our 'all in'.

Of course we know we fall short, but if we can keep this in the forefront of our living, of our daily lives at least some of the time we would be living our faith. We will be doing our best to give our all, to be all in.

Along these lines, of keeping this in the forefront of my living this week, as I have reflected on this passage in the midst of facing the daily news of injustices in our nation and our communities, floods, fires both near and far, war and starvation, I have given myself the task of taking one or two of the phrases in the last few verses of our text for the day and making it the spiritual focus of my day.

I would like to invite you to do the same if that is helpful for you. Maybe reflect on the verses and lift one phrase out and set it as a reminder on your phone so it pops up in the midst of your day. Or print it out and tape it to your refrigerator or computer screen. Then the next day, take another. There are so many good ones

here. In conclusion, I will read these verses one more time. See if one or two speak to you in this moment.

“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, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.”

May these words of Paul be words that come off the page and into our hearts and our minds and our bodies today, as individuals and as this community of believers here and now. All in.