

“Genuine Love”  
Exodus 3:1-15, Romans 12:9-21

Sometimes the order in which things happen does not matter. If you want to eat your vanilla ice cream before you eat your green beans, it does not matter, as long as you eat both. If you decide to put on your shirt before you put on your pants, it’s perfectly fine, as long as you wear both in public. If you choose to read the comics section of the newspaper before you read the opinion section, we don’t care.

Sometimes the order in which things happen is irrelevant.

But other times the order is indispensable. It doesn’t work if you use that little mechanical arm beside the car’s steering wheel *after* you’ve already turned. Likewise you can’t have Holy Communion unless you first open your mouth to receive it. And, please put your underwear on *before* you put on your clothes, not the other way around. Some things only make sense and work correctly if done in the right order.

Paul constantly reminds us of this. He says God’s grace and love for us and for all the world through Jesus Christ comes first. *Then* comes

Jeff Paschal

our grateful response, our thankful worship, our at least semi-faithful lives. But God's grace and love come first.

If we change the order and imagine we have to be good enough and *then* God will love us, this does not work. It just makes us anxious about doing enough to be on God's good side or prideful that we have earned God's love. The order matters. God's grace and love for us and for all the world through Jesus Christ comes first. *Then* we respond out of gratitude not fear or obligation.

Romans 12:9-21 describes part of our response to God's grace and love. It's a description of life in the Christian community, what it means to be the church, and the living, breathing Body of Christ. But, as one Bible scholar points out, "In the text for this Sunday a minimalist count discovers twenty-three separate imperatives." (David L. Bartlett, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 4*, 15.) Twenty-Three imperatives.

So at the risk of over-simplifying, we're going to look at some of those imperatives as part of just three overarching themes that answer the question: How do we show genuine love for God as we show genuine love for each other?

Jeff Paschal

Paul says, “Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor...Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.” We might call this the theme of solidarity.

As Christians relate to each other in the church, we’re called to a strange and wonderful competition. It’s not a competition to see who can receive the most attention. It’s not a contest for who can have the largest congregation or the most beautiful sanctuary. It’s not about who has the biggest budget or the most prestigious members. No. The competition, according to Paul, is to try to outdo each other in honoring and respecting each other. How much can we honor and respect each other?

So, of course, that means listening to each other, and not just tapping our foot waiting to jump in with the right answer. It means being patient with differences, even enjoying differences. It still means speaking the truth in love. But when we disagree, as we sometimes will, how can we speak the truth as we understand it and express our disagreements in ways that honor and respect each other? This is not easy, but Paul says this is part of genuine love.

Jeff Paschal

And as part of our genuine love, our solidarity with each other, Paul says we “rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep.”

One of the great strengths of Guilford Park Presbyterian is how this church does exactly that. So after worship this morning, a group of our congregation’s members will take Holy Communion to our members who may be in nursing homes or in their own homes and unable to come here for worship with us. So these folks will not be separate; they will be connected to us, to worship, and to God with this extended communion.

And often the clergy in our congregation will go and visit someone in the hospital or nursing home or in that person’s own home, and the person being visited will say, “It’s great to see you. So and so (Guilford Park church member) was here last week. She checks on me all the time.” This is a good thing.

And when there is sickness or death, people from this church visit and bring food and listen and cry. When there are funerals people show up to worship, mourn, serve the food and pour the punch, usher and hand out bulletins. This congregation will weep with you.

Jeff Paschal

It will also rejoice with you. Somebody gets an award, or gets something published or has an art show, or gets a promotion, or has a baby or grandbaby, and we rejoice with those who rejoice. Hugs and handshakes in the church hallways. Telephones ring with congratulations. Facebook and Instagram light up with celebration. As Paul urges, we practice solidarity with each other.

The challenge for our solidarity is to keep trying to improve. It's easy to miss someone in need in our church. How can the staff and members do a better job of reaching people who are hurting? How can congregation members themselves do better at communicating their needs so that we can "rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep"? And what about the people outside these walls, maybe people near Houston, or in Nicaragua, or DC, or down the street? What are their needs that we can meet? How can we be in solidarity with them?

Then, in verse 16, Paul mines another aspect of genuine love in community. He says, "Live in harmony with one another; do not be

Jeff Paschal

haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are.”

But we live in a time when rude arrogance is celebrated as “being real,” when leaders focus again and again not upon the people they’ve promised to serve but upon themselves and protecting their titanic egos.

Clergy are not immune, of course. A few years ago, while noting a fellow clergyperson’s massive self-image, a parish associate friend whispered, “Do you think he believes his own press releases?”

And laypeople also struggle. Christian writer Donald Miller says he was a fundamentalist Christian for a summer. He writes, “I figured what people needed was a kick in the butt, and if I failed at godliness it was because those around me weren’t trying hard enough. I believed if word got out about grace, the whole church was going to turn into a brothel. I was a real jerk, I think.

“I hit my self-righteous apex while working at a fundamentalist Christian camp in Colorado. I was living in a cabin in the Rockies with about seven other guys, and...[we] fell into this militant Christianity that says you should live like a Navy SEAL for Jesus....We would fast all

Jeff Paschal

the time, pray together twice each day, memorize Scripture, pat each other on the back and that sort of thing. Summer was coming to a close, and we were getting pretty proud of ourselves...” Miller says the guys were going their separate ways and they wondered how to maintain their superior discipline without the group. So they came up with a written contract, how much Bible they would read and memorize daily, that sort of thing. He says, “We sat around one night with pen and paper and offered sacrifices, each of us trying to outman the other with bigger and brighter lambs for the slaughter. We were the direct opposite of a frat house; instead of funneling our testosterone into binge drinking and rowdy parties, we were manning up to Jesus, bumping Him chest to chest, as it were, like Bible salesman on steroids.” And how do you think the year with this rigorous contract went? Miller says, “I hated the entire year. Hated it. I felt like a failure every morning. I hated looking in the mirror because I was a flop. I got ticked at all the people who were having fun with their lives.” (Donald Miller, *Blue Like Jazz*, 79-81)

Paul says, “Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are.”

Jeff Paschal

Genuine love is humble not arrogant. It does not separate us from others because we are so virtuous and they are not. Instead, genuine love simply joins all of God's children swimming in the ocean of God's mercy.

And finally genuine love has particular ways of responding to mistreatment and persecution. Here's Paul. "Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all...Beloved, never avenge yourselves but leave room for the wrath of God. As it's written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' No, 'if your enemies are hungry, feed them; they're thirsty, give them something to drink; because by doing this you'll heap burning coals on their heads.' Don't be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

Now we can be honest. This passage is at least a little bit attractive, because it sounds like if somebody is treating us terribly we can be nice to them and then God will really get 'em. "Burning coals on their heads!" Ha! Kill 'em with kindness!

But that's probably not the best reading of the text. As one Bible scholar says, "...many...have understood the coals as a symbol of

Jeff Paschal

burning pangs of shame. The enemy would be moved by kindness to shame, remorse, and humiliation, which would burn like coals of fire upon his head.” (Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 658)

On a Sunday morning two or three years ago, one of those pretend churches that’s actually just a cover for a hate group, showed up at a sister congregation in Greensboro--College Park Baptist Church. Now College Park is an American Baptist Church that has long been known for inclusiveness and diversity. But this hate group showed up and stood outside the church with nasty signs, and accosted people, and called gay members names and called women names that we cannot say in worship.

Michael Usey is the senior pastor at College Park. I think Michael had a couple of off-duty police officers keeping an eye out. And then he did something else. He sent some church members out with food and drink for the protestors. Isn’t that awesome? The protestors refused the food and drink, but I wonder if they felt any burning coals or at least a few seeds of doubt about their sad and misguided cause. I wonder.

As we face the rise of more hate groups in our country in recent months and years, our sister church is a fine teacher, isn’t she? And

Jeff Paschal

Paul's words ring true as well. "Do not repay anyone evil for evil...leave room for the wrath of God...If your enemies are hungry, feed them; thirsty, give them something to drink...burning coals...Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." Paul challenges us to be more creative in our response to evil and violence. Do not respond with our own evil and violence. Overcome evil with good.

If we think about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement, we remember that civil rights did not begin to come in our country because the marchers met hatred and violence with equal amounts of hatred and violence. No. What turned the tide was the utter discipline of the civil rights marchers who refused to respond to their persecutors hatred and violence with their own hatred and violence. They chose the burning coals of nonviolent love instead.

And when the citizens of our country saw these folks putting their lives on the line and being beaten with clubs, bitten by dogs, blasted by fire hoses, and even murdered, the people of our country were finally filled with revulsion at the persecutors and awe at the marchers. And the world began to shift toward God's justice.

Jeff Paschal

Our time of testing may be coming too. Will our love be brave and genuine? Let us pray it will.

And let us pray for daily genuine love that practices solidarity, that's humble, and that's creative in responding to persecution and evil.

And let us pray with confidence, because we know God's love in Jesus Christ has won and will finally win. Thanks be to God. Amen. ©Jeff

Paschal