

"Love from the Center of Who You Are"

A Sermon on Romans 12:9-21

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I was recently reminded of a particular portion of the Velveteen Rabbit, and I want to read it to you:

"What is REAL?" asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. "Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?"

"Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real."

"Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit.

"Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are Real you don't mind being hurt."

"Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," he asked, "or bit by bit?"

"It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept.

Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

"Let love be genuine" is how our section from the book of Romans begins. Or as the Message translates, *"Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it."*

Love from the real you - the one made and redeemed in the image of God beneath all the layers we hide behind and hold up to one another....love from the real you. (That is the whole thing)

Paul is writing to the church in Rome - a church comprised of Jews and Gentiles. And after eleven chapters in this letter to the church at Rome in which Paul articulate a profound theology of God's grace in Jesus Christ, he moves at chapter 12 into practical exhortation - and the thing he really wants to talk about is loving from the center of who you are.

And the fact that he spends considerable time unpacking what that means points to the fact that he is writing to a group of Christians who are struggling mightily to let love be genuine.

Let's take a moment to get a picture of precisely how that is happening (and let me say right off the bat, I am indebted to Scot McKnight's recent book, "Reading Romans Backwards" for much of what follows - it is his commentary on Romans which helps us see that the book of Romans is not one long theological treatise but is - at essence - a pastoral letter addressed to a church with some real issues).

In one part of the church you have the Jewish Christians - those who believe in Jesus and they also observe the Torah, the law of God as articulated most especially in the first five books of the Bible.

So, they take seriously things that most people in Rome think nothing of - and most centrally at issue in the church is the fact that these Jewish Christians do not eat any meat that has been used as a sacrifice to a pagan god. No idol meat. In fact, one of the central ways this group shows forth its faithfulness to God is by keeping the sacred, inviolable law of God.

In this same church you have Gentile Christians - those from among Rome's very cosmopolitan population who have converted to Christianity and also believe in Jesus but do not believe the Torah is binding at all. They are free in Jesus Christ, and absolutely they will eat any and all meat because the idols to which the meat was offered are not even real. In fact, this group shows forth their faithfulness in such things as eating any and all meat for it tangibly shows to all that they are free in Christ.

It perhaps does not surprise us in the least that these two groups were having a difficult time getting along.

The Jewish Christians 'sit in judgment' of the Gentile Christians, as Paul puts in Romans 14. It's a Greek word that has the sense of playing the part of God - of rendering what God thinks about that person, those people.

The Jewish Christians have the Scriptures on their side, they are keeping the faith accordingly, and so yeah - they sit in the seat of God and judge the free-wheeling, loose morals, sure-seems-like-anything-goes Gentile "Christians."

The Gentile Christians, Paul writes in Romans 14, "disdain" the Jewish Christians.

That's a word in Greek that means to perceive someone as beneath another's consideration. Lower than you. The Gentile Christians, which likely have some among them from the more elite parts of society - this group looks down upon the Jewish Christians. They see the Jewish Christians as backward, as antiquated, as people who just don't get it - and to follow rigid food laws like them would lead to social ostracism and likely material loss because you just didn't turn down shared meat in that society.

Judgement from one direction. Disdain from the other. The church of Jesus Christ in Rome (also seems likely some similar dynamics in the church at Corinth).

Now, these two groups were quite different in one sense.

"The law is how we show forth faithfulness! Freedom is how we show forth faithfulness!"

But in one critical way these two groups were absolutely the same. Both groups are fully convinced of their position not just rationally - but as deeply faithful and right.

And so - whether from a place of righteous judgment or condescending disdain - increasingly each side's life excludes the other side. Literally, they have difficulty getting to the same table for a meal because there may very well be meat - and so there's the issue, there's the litmus test for who's right and whose not.

What a relief the church no longer feels such strong animosity about idol meat - but I think we readily recognize if it isn't idol meat, it is the sale of indulgences.

If it isn't indulgences, it's slavery.

If it isn't slavery it's evolution.

If it isn't evolution, it's abortion - or it's same-sex marriage or it's the 2020 election.

Which is to say, always before the church there are issues of great importance in which sides are taken not just rationally but because we have discerned a side to be deeply faithful and right...and always, then, it becomes increasingly difficult to get to the same table with those whose convictions differ sharply.

Who among us has already thought ahead to Thanksgiving and it's not only the possibility of spreading COVID-19 that is worrisome with all the mix of folks from all over...but sometimes what worries us most acutely is that families who share the same last name may not be able to handle gathering at the same table.

Paul, what is your word unto such a situation? Such a moment in our families and church family? (What say you to the Jewish Christians who sit in righteous judgment and the Gentile Christians who sit in we-know-better-than-you disdain?)
Let love be genuine...Love from the center of who you are...love from the real you.

Being right and pursuing that which is true is critically important...oh but to do so and lose love along the way... for Paul, love is the glue. Love is always the thing, in particular love toward the other side, the enemies.

How does he famously put it in 1 Corinthians 13 - "if you have not love, you have nothing."

How does Jesus put it before those who have put him upon the cross? *"Father forgive them for they know not what they do."*

Love - love especially for enemies - it sits at the center of what we are about, and Paul is raising that as the central focus to a divided church.

The remaining verses of 10-21 essentially unpack what it means to love genuinely. Love from the center. Love from the real you.

We hear very practical things like...persevere in prayer; contribute to the needs of those in the church and be hospitable to strangers...bless the people who persecute you - don't curse them. Be humble. Don't repay evil for evil. If your enemies are hungry or thirsty - give them food, drink.

It is sections of the Bible like this one that make me think of Mark Twain's insight:

"I am not troubled by the things in the Bible which I do not understand, but I am troubled by those things which I do understand and which I find very difficult to measure up to."

I think we understand this part of the Bible, and so I am not going to spend time in this sermon unpacking each of these exhortations.

What we struggle with, I think, is that we do understand them and can be timid to live them forthrightly.

And so what I want to do instead of talking through all of them is help us hear which part of these verses God may be putting on our heart to hear and act upon this day.

And I want to go about that by first describing how the church in Rome would have heard Paul's letter for the very first time.

In ancient times when a letter was written and then delivered to a people - the person who wrote it often chose someone in particular to read the letter aloud, and that letter writer would go over somewhat extensively with the letter reader how that letter was to be read aloud.

In many ways, the letter - when it was read aloud - it was to be performed so that the ideas were conveyed correctly and with the right emphases.

The standard elements of this performative reading included gestures at the right spots, voice inflection, speeding up or slowing down, ad-libbing if needed, and then - critically - the eye contact. The reader would look over toward the people whom specific words really needed to be heard.

In Paul's case, he chose a woman named Phoebe to read the letter to the church at Rome by going to the various houses churches in which the Jewish and Gentile Christians would gather together.

Can you imagine gathering in the intimate setting of a home with a few other folks - some within your own biological or Christian family with whom you disagree over matters of significant importance...perhaps even they have become enemies.

Can you imagine being in that room and hearing Phoebe read Paul's words - and upon words in particular point might Phoebe look in your direction?

I am going to read Romans 12:9-21 again, but this time I am going to read from the Message Translation to give us a slightly more contemporary hearing of these words of Scripture.

And my invitation is that as I read this, you consider at which point you sense Phoebe might look directly toward you...and might that be the Holy Spirit's prompting unto a certain action or actions?

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.

When did Phoebe look your way?

To be sure, nothing in Paul's exhortations promises 'success' - at least if success is defined as changing the enemy. There is nothing here to suggest that a church that takes these exhortations seriously will see the other side stop eating the meat - or start eating the meat. The call is simply to faithfulness, regardless of what they do or do not do.

But it doesn't mean nothing will change when we risk loving the other side.

How does Psalm 23 famously put it when talking about what happens when we draw near to enemies?

"you prepare a table before me in the presence of mine enemies."

When we draw near to our enemies, when we love our enemies - Jesus shows up. He prepares a table. Jesus nourishes us with his very love in the presence of our enemies.

That is a profound promise.

The Velveteen Rabbit talks about discovering the real you once you have been slowly but surely loved to pieces by a child. There is much truth in that story.

And it makes me mindful that a promise of Scripture is that we discover our real selves,

true selves, people-God-made-us-to-be-selves when we have been slowly and surely loved to pieces by God. And the truth is, one of the more central ways Jesus shows up to love us is when we risk loving the judgmental over there, the disdainful over there. That's where he sets up table.

"In the presence of mine enemies" - that is where we are fed upon Love himself.

And, of course, you are what you eat.

To be sure, in the course of loving our enemies it may well be that we lose our hair and our eye droops and our joints grow loose and our body shabby... such love is not easy. But, would we trade it for the world if we knew that in such love we had been nourished unto our full, real, uninhibited selves in Jesus Christ? Amen.