

Love and Labor: Pentecost XIV
Romans 12:9-21 and Excerpt from Bonhoeffer
September 6, 2020
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The first official Labor Day was held in 1894, signed into law by President Grover Cleveland. But the journey toward a day to celebrate the achievements of the workingmen – and women – of our country had begun decades earlier, as the Industrial Revolution exposed the dangerous and exploitative conditions of workers toiling 12-hour days, seven days a week to only eke out an existence. As we honor the contributions of those who labor for our well-being we will note, with gratitude, the bus drivers, grocery store clerks, hospital custodians, 911 responders who have given of themselves during these last months. It has become obvious this year how dependent we are on one another for our life together to work.

Whenever this Sunday comes around, I think of the wise parishioner who named how seldom preachers touch upon the daily work of their congregants in their sermons, how rare it is for a sermon to link the decisions faced in board rooms, classrooms, factory floors with the Gospel language of love, grace and salvation. It isn't that they don't intersect – of course they do – but ministers can get too caught up in scriptural world in front of them to attend appropriately to the challenges of life Monday to Saturday. So today, as we conclude our sermon series looking at Paul's letter to the Romans, I want to preach about labor and love, joining Paul's exhortation - Let your love be genuine – with the labor of our daily lives.

In this 12th chapter of Romans, Paul is nearing the end of his long missal to a small Christian community eking out its survival in a city that was the center of the world. Our reading started at verse 9, but an important shift in the letter happened a few verses beforehand, in verse 1. For 11 chapters, Paul was laid out his argument about God's work of restoring a right relationship between humankind and God through the cross and resurrection of Jesus. Paul has hammered home his point: Jesus Christ has reconciled you to God, and every facet of creation is a part of this new reality. And then in chapter 12, verse 1, Paul says: "I appeal to you, therefore, brothers and sisters, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice..." Paul often moves his arguments forward through tiny, nearly forgettable words. Therefore. You have heard the argument of Jesus's living presence in your life, therefore, you must act in light of that truth. There is no love without labor. There is no faith without action. Love of God and laboring for God's love for others go hand in hand.

Lest we miss the implications of Paul's little "therefore," he describes what this love in action will look like beginning in verse nine. And over the next twenty one verses Paul gives us no less than thirty imperatives about how to act: hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good, be mutual in affection, unflagging in zeal, be hopeful, patient, prayerful, celebrate together, weep together, be humble about your gifts, generous and welcoming, especially to those strangers who are in need. Did you get all of his instructions? How is it possible to be this kind of living sacrifice every day?

Paul starts by saying Let love be genuine. Let love be real, concrete, steady, practical. It strikes me that this aligns with the love we practice to those who are closest to us. Perhaps a starting point for reflection comes in thinking about how we love our spouses, children, parents, cousins, neighbors, and friends. Is our love of them a witness to the love we have received from God in Christ Jesus?

Quarantine has meant our family spends a lot more time together than we did before last March. We're all together in the house. And in many respects that is good thing. Especially early on this meant extra time for meals, games, or movies. But after a few months of living on top of each other the novelty – and good cheer- wears thin. It's hard to not have a space to think or talk privately, to be battling each other for WIFI, to see a never-ending stream of dishes in the sink. Genuine love, reminds Paul, is patient, respectful, humble, forgiving. It comes in cultivating the practices of saying "I'm sorry," "this is what I need," and "we are in this together."

Another example of such genuine, practical love comes to us from the seminary Bonhoeffer led in Germany in the late 1930's. Situated in a rural area, the seminary operated with students and their professor sharing a household, and the accompanying meals, worship, chores, prayers and Holy Communion. Critics complained that it was closer to monastic living than a regular seminary, to which Bonhoeffer responded that the best way to raise up faithful ministers was to form them as disciples by shaping their souls toward Christ. A story is told about their common life in which Bonhoeffer instructed the community to sing in harmony during worship. When students protested, Bonhoeffer reminded them that they lived in a divided country, in a time when people were being torn apart – and by their sacrifice of singing in harmony only, they could witness to the unity found in Christ.¹

Having exhorted his listeners toward genuine love, Paul turns his attention to how Christians treat their enemies. He echoes the teachings of Jesus: bless those who persecute you, do not repay anyone evil for evil. We don't know exactly who Paul might be imagining here. We can with more confidence imagine Bonhoeffer, when preaching on the text, thinking of his forced exile from the German church and former colleagues now separated by their approach to Nazism. Today there is space for us to hold in our mind's eye, those we would call enemies.

To all of these, Paul offers a two-pronged response. First, learn to recognize what is evil as evil. There will be things around you that oppose Christ. There will be tempting, idolatrous ways of thinking or acting that will lead you from God. Resist them through the forces of good. Resist them with the same patience, hopefulness, generosity, and love that you offer to those who you call friends. Bonhoeffer unpacks Paul's instructions in the sermon excerpt we heard today. He begins that sermon by saying you have received mercy. The mercy God extends to us is also, equally, extended to your enemies. As God gave to you, you give to them, as a holy gesture, for those whose awful inner poverty leads to evil will only be transformed by the strength of God's love.

¹ Owens, Roger L. "The Pandemic Calls for Closed Hymnals" in *The Christian Century*, Vol. 137, No. 16, July 29, 2020.

Let's not romanticize this statement. Bonhoeffer is referring to those who have driven him out of his church, who are curtailing civil liberties and harassing vulnerable populations. He is referring to those who will, one day in the future, end his earthly life. By taking this posture he is not condoning or minimizing their behavior. He is meeting evil with the light, power, and the love of the gospel, the only thing capable of defeating it.

It is at Finkelstein that Bonhoeffer composed the work that would become his life's achievement, the book, *The Cost of Discipleship*. His lectures to the students are the basis for a work now known through the church, by his famous distinction between cheap and costly grace. One piece of the book touches upon this extraordinary command to love our enemies. Bonhoeffer writes, "How does love conquer? By asking not how the enemy treats love but only how Jesus treated it. The love for our enemies takes us along the way of the cross and into community with the crucified. The more we are driven along this road, the more certain is the victory of love over the enemy's hatred. It is not the disciple's own love, but the love of Jesus Christ alone, who for the sake of his enemies went to the cross and prayed for them as he hung there. In the face of the cross the disciples realized that they too were his enemies, and that he had overcome them by his love. It is this that opens the disciples' eyes and enables them to see their enemy as a brother or sister." They all stand together beneath the cross of Christ."²

The beginning of September always heralds the start of fall. This will be a fall like no other. There is a certain anxiety in the air, uncertainty of how the pandemic will twist in the weeks ahead, how we will cope with online lives, when we will feel fully safe to be out and about without restrictions, and of course, the November election. The body of Christ has endured many tumultuous seasons: the persecution of Christians in Rome in the decades following Paul's writings, the Black Plagues of Europe and Asia in the Middle Ages, closer to home, a civil war and a Great Depression. The body of Christ is no stranger to laboring in love, extending hospitality to friend and stranger, to meeting ill intent with the force of love's convictions. Where do we find the strength to do such difficult, liberating work? Standing at the foot of the cross, owning up to our own sinfulness, seeing ourselves as recipients of God's mercy, and finding there the confidence that no struggle can thwart, ultimately, God's unending life. Amen.

² Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *The Cost of Discipleship* as found in *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: Harper Collins, 1990), 319.