

August 30, 2020
Love Is What Love Does
Annette Hill Briggs
Romans 12:9-21

Marks of the True Christian

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 Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. ¹⁸ If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

¹⁹ Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. ²⁰ On the contrary:

"If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."

²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

If you stripped away the material – your safe neighborhood, your healthy family, your job – how would you know God loves you? Simply, prayer. Years and years of prayer. One minute, five minutes, ten minutes a day. Sips and tastes, like a hummingbird at a flower, over the course of a lifetime. The answer is no more interesting than that, friends, nor less. I am spending the next few weeks in the epistles. If the series has a name, it might be "Faith Is an Inside Job." That job, friends, is prayer.

Let's go there now. *What keeps us from your presence, O God? What could possibly be more important? We think we are busy. You must laugh at that, all the while calling us to your side, into your lap even. We are your children, after all. In your name we pray. Amen.*

Two thousand and some years after Jacob stole one from his brother, the Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Rome to say that in Christ there is no such thing as a birthright. In Christ, there are no first and second sons. And if we want to run three doors down to the book of Galatians, chapter three, he says that in Christ there aren't sons and daughters at all, that all are ONE in Christ. We are one, in that all have sinned. All have fallen short. Christ died once and for all. For eleven chapters, Paul lays out this Christology, the fundamental equality of Jews and Gentiles in Jesus Christ, an undeniable kinship between them, sealed in crucified Christ.

Therefore, chapter 12 – our chapter – begins. (Any time the Bible says “therefore,” we probably ought to duck. But maybe not this time.) *Therefore – in the absence of such birthright, therefore – in the reality of this undeniable kinship, here is how you are to live, you believers, you the church.* Twenty-plus injunctions, just in chapter 12. I want to consider two and treat them as one. *Let love be genuine*, from verse 9. And *persevere in prayer*, from verse 11.

“Genuine”: your Bible translation might say *authentic*. I like both of those better than *sincere*. *Original* even. *Let your love match Love in its truest form*, its truest form being God’s own self, for God is Love. This is the Love Paul describes in I Corinthians 13: *Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.* That is genuine love.

That love, Paul says, *let that be the love with which you love.* “Good idea!” says my preacher self. “*Noooo, it’s too hard,*” whines my Christian self, as she stomps her foot. My Christian self is pretty much a toddler, you see. She wants her own way ALL the time. She’s selfish and demanding and sassy. She behaves better for other people than she does at home. She also knows what people will praise her for, and she lives on praise the way some kids would live on candy if they could. Friends, no matter what you think of my preaching, on my worst day I am a better preacher than I am a Christian.

A good amount of the reason is my fault. But some of the reason is that it is difficult to grow in Christ, given that we only truly grow by praying. We have to pray. For our love to be genuine, we have to persevere in prayer. We have to pray. For our love to be genuine, we must be loved by that same love we seek to use to love others. We must recognize the feel and taste and smell of being genuinely loved so patiently, so kindly, so unconditionally. We must submit ourselves to the tedious surgery whereby genuine love draws out the shrapnel of fear and anxiety we’ve carried for so long, and the sweetness of it as well, of being invited into the presence of the One who never tires of listening to us, who never sighs or grunts or rolls his eyes, who never checks his phone while we are talking.

This is persevering in prayer, friends, chasing that love that isn’t even running from us. We don’t have to move our bodies an inch, just our thoughts, just our attention. Around the veil of our busy minds, Genuine Love is waiting.

Here’s something I wonder. I wonder how my life would be different now if my first grasp of faith had been “*God wants me to be loved*” instead of “*God wants me to be good*”? If I had been raised learning to pray as well as I learned to work? Not to ask for things I wanted or needed, but to receive what was already mine: the unconditional love of the Creator of the Universe.

I wonder how a church full of believers raised on that might move across the earth: rather than treating other human beings as broken things to be rescued, treating them as children of the same Father-Mother-God. Lovingly, I would think; we'd move lovingly toward each other with patience, kindness and generosity. Like grown-ups instead of toddlers, grown-ups in the faith, that is. Because that's the trouble, friends. These bodies of ours, our minds included, they don't need much help growing up. Feed them and they grow.

But our spirits, they don't work like that. Spirits will stay in preschool forever unless we choose to do the work. (For scholarly work on this subject, check out Sharon Daloz Parks.) And most of that work, friends, is praying. Think of praying as our work, the same way eating is a hummingbird's work. They eat to live. And to live, they need twelve times their own body weight in nectar, plus a few aphids for protein. They have to eat, just to have the energy to eat! Imagine prayer not just as food, but as eating itself! Praying as the very thing that keeps us alive. I don't think it's an exaggeration at all, if being alive in Christ is what we mean by alive. Alive in Christ, that's who we say we are. But is that the center from which we do our lives? From which we face everything this world puts in our path? That nectar, that love of God, we fetch it, sips at a time – because who can manage more of the love of God than that, right? We carry it back and forth between our prayers and the world, always making sure to fill our own selves up first with its grace and its justice.

Yeah, justice. That's big in Romans, our *justification by faith* – another sermon I don't have time to preach, but a super important one! The point here being, friends, all these injunctions of Paul's regarding how to live together with folks we don't especially like, they all amount to an inside job. Knowing ourselves as beloved gives us proper tools for loving other people. Knowing our own undeservedness goes a long way toward being patient, kind, and longsuffering with others. It's always difficult. It's about to get more difficult. Quarantine is headed into shorter, colder days, while all around us, culture wars are heating up. The next few months will be some of the ugliest of my lifetime, I expect. None of which will encourage us to sit still and let God love us.

Do it anyway. Sit. Breathe. Recognize your breath as God loving you, not just now, but with every breath you draw; when you thank Him and when you don't; when you are good and when you aren't. Nothing about this Love depends on you. We have this Love for no reason apart from Love itself. Because Love loves. Love is what Love does. And praying, we let Love love us all the more.

Let's pray together now: *A moment, a drop of your pure and perfect love poured into our hearts can drown a day's worth of worry and sorrow, O God. Whatever else falls away, whatever else is taken from us, your love remains, and we can hold fast to you. In your peace we pray and rest. Amen.*