

Loving Friends Loving Enemies  
Romans Summer Sermon Series – September 9<sup>th</sup>, 2007

**Series: Extreme Make Over**  
**Text: Romans 12:9-21**

A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Stacey D. Jones on September 9<sup>th</sup>, 2007 at Northminster Presbyterian Church.

This summer we have been studying the book of Romans so our lives can become more centered on and transformed by God. Paul is writing this church in Rome, whom he never met personally, to help them understand the full import of what God did through his Son, Jesus. Paul knew if they truly embraced God's view of their lives and world, they would be transformed!

Turn to Romans 12. Paul, in chapter twelve, gives us practical wisdom on how to live out our lives in Christ. I will focus on *how to love our friends and our enemies*. This whole section is about how to really love our friends, the people around us.

In a previous church, in what seems like a lifetime ago I received a call from one of the chaplains at Hospice to come be with a family from the church, for their daughter who (in her mid-twenties) was approaching death. She had a genetic progressive disorder of the nervous system and muscles known as Friedreich's Ataxia. Since the age of nine life had been a battle for her. She had a stroke at the beginning of this, which put her in a downward spiral.

I did not know what to expect. I arrived and a nurse was busy with her so I waited outside. Hospice provides a wonderfully calm and beautiful environment for people who are exiting this life. When the nurse finished, I went in and she was resting. No one else was in the room, so I talked softly to her, put my hand on her arm, and began to pray for her. As I prayed, her good friend came in. She quietly came along the other side and joined me in prayer. After I finished I talked with her as she had been there keeping a many-day vigil of love and support along with many others. The care and compassion was palatable in the room. These friends and this family were a living demonstration of this passage. They were loving sincerely. They were honoring the person I had come to see. They were not lacking in zeal but keeping their spiritual passion through tangible service to her. I left feeling greatly blessed and humbled by their love.

How do we love our friends? As Paul puts it, "sincerely." Peterson says in the Message Bible, "Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it." I admit I've always thought of myself as a giving person. But it turns out I've learned over the past two years that I still have to develop my character! The birth of our two children has challenged me in ways I did not expect. I have been forced to face my own selfishness, my lack of flexibility, and the shallowness of the love I have to offer. I expected them to conform to my way of living and my time schedule. It turns out they need my love all the time and sometimes in ways I don't really want to offer. I don't always want to take time to change a diaper, especially those really nasty ones. I do NOT like Alex waking up early on my only day off.

In order to love them sincerely I realized I needed to confess my selfishness and laziness. I had to ask God for forgiveness and to give me willingness to honor them and serve them joyfully. It did not come easily. I served even when I did not feel like it. I asked God to change my heart and show me how to enjoy these little children. Don't get me wrong, I've always loved them as every parent loves their child, but it's been a slow process learning to not resent the 6:00 a.m. cries or the clingy days. I am still learning how to love sincerely. I have to ask God daily for that desire and ability. As I do, I grow and my friendships deepen.

How does this passage apply to us today? First, if you are not involved in some aspect of our community life, find your place. If you and I really want to become the kind of people God wants us to be, we need to be in community. We do not learn love living in isolation. Join the choir, a small group, a Bible study, a mission team, the ushers, a group that is serving in a way that fits you. Put yourself in places where you are serving with others. Let them get to know you. Let God shape you in the context of community.

Second, if you and I really want to be like Jesus, we need to let God deal with our inner hearts. God is in the business of transforming our hearts. If you are feeling grumpy, jealous, cranky, envious, hurt, or bitter, please invite God to come in and change you. You know when your love is insincere. We can be so polite to people while they are in front of us and then tear them apart when they walk away. Do not let that happen! I think that is why Paul says, "Hate what is evil; cling to what is good." If you and I allow that kind of cancer to live in our minds and emotions, it will infect our lives, hinder the ways God can work in and through us, and harm this church.

Honesty is the starting place for healthy relationships. If your hurt, be honest with God about what is inside you. Then find someone you trust to confide in and pray for you in your struggle. God loves to answer that kind of prayer and make your love sincere. As we seek to become a church where all are welcomed and practice extravagant hospitality, we need to keep our love sincere.

What do you and I do, however, when we come face to face with people who have hurt us? How do we love them sincerely?

This past week I was talking with some clergy friends about Romans 12. What blessed me most in our discussion of this chapter was hearing several people share a similar conclusion. As you know, in the first two verses of Romans 12, Paul urges us to offer up our lives as living sacrifices, to choose to conform no longer to the pattern of this world but be continually transformed by God's Word and God's ways.

The similar conclusion I heard was this: This is hard stuff! This offering ourselves to God as living sacrifices is not a once and done deal. It is a conscious, daily (sometimes hourly) decision of the will. This transformation and renewal of our minds, this shift from doing life according to the world's pattern to doing life according to God's ways.... This will take every bit of our resolve and determination. It is NOT the path of least resistance.

Each of us in his/her own way sang this common lament: *I want to pursue God with everything in me. That is my heart's desire. Some days it feels good, and glorious, and relatively easy. And some days it feels utterly impossible.* I felt great comfort in hearing people echo my very own thoughts.

Romans 12 is a fabulous chapter. But I want you to know that it's okay to read Romans 12 and be overwhelmed by it. It's okay to read v. 9-21 (our focus for today) and admit that there's no way in the world you can love *in that way* on your own strength. The sooner we admit that, the sooner we will call upon the Holy Spirit to come and equip us to love in a way that is not humanly possible.

As I was studying this passage, I noted that Romans 12: 9-21 (a great passage on agape love) doesn't get read at weddings. On the other hand, I Corinthians 13 gets plenty of airtime: *Love is patient, love is kind... it always protects, trusts, hopes, and perseveres. Love never fails.*

I Corinthians 13 shows up everywhere: weddings, greeting cards, hymns, worship songs, Argus posters with fuzzy cats.... People spend painstaking hours cross-stitching I Cor. 13 and give it away as a gift.

But look at Romans 12: 9-21. Look at v. 14: *Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.* Do any of you have a needlepoint pillow at home with that verse on it? Look at v. 17: *Do not repay anyone evil for evil.* And v. 19: *Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath....*

I'm wondering: Is there anyone else here (besides me) who struggles with these verses? Romans 12:9-21 is that part of agape love that is unpoetic, unglamorous, unromantic, and just plain hard to do.

Why would God call us to a way of loving that is so difficult, so frustrating, and nearly impossible? God determined a long time ago (and hasn't changed His mind about this) that the church will be His major mouthpiece to an unbelieving world. You and I, as part of the community of believers, are one of God's primary ways of making Himself known. That's scary, isn't it? Because sometimes the church universal has done a bad job at representing God. But God has not given up on what He wants to do through Christian communities. And though our relationships will be messy and imperfect, when people see us bearing with each other, forgiving, honoring, even blessing those who hurt us – that will be an irresistible testimony. That will be the most compelling apologetic.

So, missionally-speaking, living out Romans 12:9-21 is a huge part of God's strategy for reaching the world.

But there's another question worth asking: What is the benefit for you and me personally in loving this way? And specifically, what's the benefit when we do v. 14? (*Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.*)

Over 5 years ago, when Chris and I were part of another Christian community we hit a season of relational hardship with a few people in our church. They were people whom we had called "friends", who we labored with in ministry, who we shared meals with. They were people who were highly gifted and committed in their faith, but they were also vocal, critical, and at times mean-spirited. They were loving and supportive as long as you were on their good side. But beware if you weren't.

To this day, we're not sure what went awry. But we became a target. We got the brunt of whatever issues or unrest was operating in their lives. Specific details are not important. You get the picture because at some point in your life, you've witnessed how tenuous relationships can be. Pastor and writer Mark Buchanan says, "Many relationships are only one hard bite away from breakdown. With breathtaking abruptness, they can shift from thanksgiving to resentment, praise to reviling, openness to hiddenness." That was our experience.

God is good, though. He never wastes a challenge or hardship in our lives. In His time and by His grace, all of this got worked out. Justice was seen, and we were stronger for it. In fact, as we look back on that chapter of life, we are glad for it. Through the messiness of relationships, God shaped us and refined us and deepened us in ways that nothing else could. You don't learn how to bear with one another and forgive each other by reading a book. You don't deal with your own pride by being in isolation. All of that is learned and practiced in the laboratory of community.

But here's the biggest lesson I learned. I started seeing a counselor who had a habit of being brutally honest. His question to me was: "These people who have hurt you so deeply – have you been praying that God will bless them?" I pretended that I didn't hear the question and asked her to repeat it. He did. "You have been praying blessing upon these people who have hurt you, haven't you?"

I thought about saying "yes" but knew I would be lying. Actually, I had been praying about these people, but my prayers more resembled David's prayers in the Psalms – that God would deal swiftly and decisively with his enemies. Praying blessing upon these folks? That was the farthest thing from my mind. As a matter of fact the thought made me nauseous. I left that day not sure I'd ever go back.

But as things were not getting any better, I returned with more of an open mind. With loving chastisement, he said, "Oh, I just assumed you had been praying that God would bless these people. Scripture is very clear that we must bless our enemies and not curse them. That needs to be your starting point. This was not what I wanted to hear! But I knew he was right. The Holy Spirit was bearing witness to the truth that he was speaking and informing me that this truth would help set me free.

From the moment that he asked me that question she set the direction for our time together. It was clear to me that our time was NOT going to be about re-hashing and re-living ways that I'd been hurt. It wasn't going to be a reciting of why I was justified in my anger. Our time would not be tainted by gossip. Our time would be about seeking God so that I could respond in a way that would set me free.

The whole reason God wants us to be living sacrifices is so we can be set free. He calls us to the love described in v. 9-21 not to be annoying, but because there is freedom and life when you live that way. It reminds me of that great hymn text: *Make me a captive, Lord, And then I shall be free; Force me to render up my sword, And I shall conqueror be.*

Isn't that the great paradox of our faith? When you lay down your life for Christ, you get it back. When you lay down your "right" to be angry, resentful, and bitter, you become free. And so with this counselor, we prayed and prayed and prayed. Even though I couldn't honestly say, "God, I want You to bless these people," I could begin by saying, "God, I want to want You to bless these people."

Much time was spent in confession. I hadn't realized how much resentment I had built up. Somewhere along the way, I had decided that because these people had hurt me, I would be annoyed and judgmental about everything they did. Without realizing it, I was doing the opposite of v. 17, repaying them evil for evil in my heart attitude.

It was exhausting, painful, and excellent work. Would I have gone to see this counselor had I known the road ahead? Probably not. But it has seen me through a number of these type of situations in my life and helped me in counseling others.

This counselor, is one of those people described in James 5:16 — a righteous person whose prayers are powerful and effective. How glad I am that he cared enough to call me away from responding according to the pattern of the world. And how blessed I am to have someone who would help me with the hard work of being transformed. He gave me a vision for the kind of person I want to be and the kind of community God calls us to be. May our lives be living sacrifices and may we lovingly call each other to the same.