

“Holding Fast”

Valley Presbyterian Church – September 17, 2023

16th Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Psalm 24:1-7
Romans 12:9-21

The first of two plays in my career as a thespian was in a seventh-grade production of *Cyrano de Bergerac*. I did not play Cyrano, the title character with the prominent nose, but my role was as Christian, the one to whom Cyrano provides the fancy words to woo Roxanne. Their whole romance, of course, is revealed to be a sham and – when the truth comes out – it is Cyrano’s heart, and not Christian’s face, that has won Roxanne’s love.

Our text today begins with the admonition, “Let love be genuine.” Some translations render this verse as *Let love be without hypocrisy*. The adjective is a negation of term often used for actors, ones who wear masks. The kind of love that God (through the Apostle Paul) calls us to here is not play-acting; it is no charade.

If the world is our stage, the resulting temptation is to craft our characters as the super-heroes and cast our enemies as world-wreckers. *We* make the world a better place, but *they* are destroying and corrupting all that used to be good. *We* know the best course for the right outcome, while *they* hold us back with their prejudice or foolishness or naïve nostalgia.

This “genuine” love will be the rule – the standard – by which the community and its members can enact what is holy and acceptable to God. Each piece of the exhortational ensemble that follows will make for the full presentation of what Paul describes in chapter 13 as “put(ting) on the Lord Jesus Christ.” (13:14)¹

The imperatives in this reading relate to four circles of relationship: 1) kinship within one’s own Christian community, 2) hospitality shown to “the saints,” that is, the church beyond the immediately community, including strangers, 3) blessing directed to one’s enemies, and 4) peaceable interactions with everyone.

¹ David McCabe from *WorkingPreacher.com*

All of the verb forms are plural. These words are a window on what life in Christ looks like in community. It is tempting to imagine Paul saying, *don't dare try this alone*. His advice is addressed to a gathering of people, and much of it concerns their shared life together.

Be devoted to one another, with mutual love is yet another possible translation of verse 9. The combination of words for *love* and *brother* results in a Greek word familiar to Americans – *Philadelphia*. Verse 12, with its references to hope, suffering, and prayer refers back to Romans, chapter 8, where Paul speaks of how suffering and hope characterize the Christian life and adds that the Spirit helps us, in the midst of these things, to pray.

In verse 13, Paul exhorts his readers, “Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Our generosity is meant to reach beyond the immediate community to others; to both saints and strangers with whom one interacts.

In verse 14, the circle expands again, this time to include enemies. “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.” Readers of the gospels will remember that Jesus had said something almost identical in the Sermon on the Plain, “Bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.” (Luke 6:28) To describe what he meant, Jesus pointed to God sending rain upon both the just and the unjust. To be children of such a God is to love not only the people who love us, but to love even those who mean us harm.

The circle of those to whom Christians relate in genuine love finally expands to include everyone in verse 18. “If it is possible,” Paul writes, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” One of the most common outcomes of defining a group over against others is that the insiders to the group receive certain benefits while outsiders are left out. Think of frequent flyers who get upgraded to first class or employees of the month who get better parking spots.

Such distinctions are absent in the ethic Paul describes. Instead, relationships are marked by humble, generous love, no matter the character or status of those to whom Christians relate.²

Still, verse 20, with its reference to heaping burning coals on the head of one's enemy, requires comment. The language comes from Proverbs 25 where it is also in the context of doing good to one's enemy. Scholars disagree whether Paul

² Mary Hinkle Shore from *WorkingPreacher.com*

has a particular ritual, featuring live coals, in mind. More likely, the reference is metaphorical; pointing to the way that returning good for evil has the effect of shaming one's enemy and thus possibly motivating a change in behavior. Either way, it is true that returning evil for evil has the effect of escalating the conflict and reinforcing the sense of righteous indignation on both sides; while showing hospitality to enemies is at least confusing to them and may disarm them altogether.

There is a small German town called Wunsiedel that was once the burial site of Adolph Hitler's deputy Rudolf Hess and where an annual neo-Nazi march has been taking place for decades. The townsfolk, who had previously silently endured the march from a distance came up with a clever response in 2014. On November 15 of that year, the date of the march, residents came out in the streets, welcoming and cheering the 250 or so neo-Nazis with signs thanking them for marching, even setting up water stations for the walkers (remember verse 20, "if your enemies are thirsty, give them something to drink").

This was because for every step the right-wing extremists took, local businesses and residents pledged to donate ten Euros to a non-governmental organization that fights extremism; essentially turning the march into an involuntary walk-a-thon.

As one news report put it, *the neo-Nazis had only two choices when they got to know about the plan: either they proceeded, indirectly donating money to the EXIT Germany initiative, or they acknowledged their defeat and suspended the march. They decided to pursue their plans – and participated in raising funds for an organization committed to their downfall.*

One Wunsiedel organizer added, *we want to show what else you can do, what other courses of action you have. You can do more than just block the streets or close the shutters.*³

Although Roman Christians would later face persecution at the hands of the Emperor Nero, Paul's letter to the Romans was written before this fate. As a result, the evil he addresses is not of an outside force seeking to defeat the Christians but, rather, of a subtler pressure from their own neighbors, family, and friends. These Christians found themselves on the "outside" of their social circles due to their new religious beliefs. Those who had not converted did not understand or approve of

³ Quotations from *The Guardian*

the new behaviors of their Christian counterparts who refused to attend public events, many of which were deeply integrated with idol worship.

While the issue today may not be idol worship, Christians who genuinely seek to follow the commandment to love often find themselves on the other side of their families, friends, or co-workers when it comes to current social or political issues. Amid recent white nationalist activity in the United States and Europe and public outcry against hate speech, Paul's words written to the Romans are as timely as ever.

Paul's exhortations to "love one another with mutual affection" (verse 10) and "live in harmony with one another" (verse 16) leave no room for debate – hate speech is wrong. It is an expression of the ultimate disconnection of one human being from another or from other groups of human beings. It is the result of the offending individual's failure to recognize the image of God in another and, as a result, is a separation from God. As the absence or deviation from God, hate speech is quite literally evil and ought to be condemned as such.⁴

The law of the land in Paul's day and, indeed, in Jewish tradition allowed a certain amount of retribution in these sorts of situations. Evil was not – and is not – to be left unanswered. Indeed, Paul agrees that evil must be answered: silence is *not* the answer. But, rather than "repay anyone evil for evil," Paul exhorts us to "take thought of what is noble in the sight of all." (verse 17)

In the midst of the divisive, hate-filled rhetoric in which we find ourselves, is there anything that can be considered noble or good in the sight of *all* people? How might Christians, called not to be silent, but rather to respond to hatred with goodness, promote this kind of love and harmony that Paul prescribes?

In urging the Roman Christian community to use their spiritual gifts, granted by God, to discern what is right, Paul is not commanding passive submission to the evils of this world, but commending, instead, a more excellent way. Christians are not called to ignore despair, but to help sow joy in its wake; not to condone hate, but to be all-the-more zealous in genuine love in its face. The politics – and practices – of overcoming evil are not about either ignoring evil but holding fast to what is good by confronting it with the strongest possible power – with love. Amen.

⁴ Amy Allen, "The Politics of Overcoming Evil"