
A Love Supreme

Romans 12:9-21

A sermon preached by Luke A. Powery at Duke University Chapel on Sunday, August 31, 2014

This is a great way to begin a new academic year—talking about love. L.O.V.E. “Love,” according to one gospel artist, “is a word that comes and goes but few people really know what it means to really love somebody” (Kirk Franklin). Love. I’ve heard that some go cocoo for cocoa puffs when they think about love. I’ve heard that some think love is taking a picture of your roommate when he or she wakes up in the morning and then posting it on Instagram. If I could channel Tina Turner in here today and have her ask, “What’s love got to do with it?” the apostle Paul, who’s also known as the apostle of love, would answer, ‘everything.’ We hear his famous words over and over again at weddings. “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. Love never ends” (1 Cor 13:4-8). It’s an aspiration. But for Paul, it’s an ethical imperative. It’s not just a noun because love is a verb.

It may not have the same blissful cachet as 1 Corinthians 13 but the heartbeat is the same in Romans. “Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; Love one another with mutual affection ...” It does not have the same rhetorical drama as the wedding-winning Corinthian passage, but the point is clear and even more direct here. It’s in the imperative mood, not the indicative. The indicative states a fact. The imperative makes a request and is more direct in your face. One couldn’t ignore it even if you tried because there are around thirty imperatives in this passage. Paul probably wouldn’t get an A in preaching class for an imperative-only sermon but a grade does not necessarily indicate whether one is preaching the gospel nor is it a statement about how well you love.

Paul’s style here is straightforward and plain with biting linguistic force. It’s not legato love but more akin to staccato love. A staccato note in music is a note played sharply detached from the others. It is short, crisp, and disconnected from its neighbor note as opposed to the flowing musical articulation of legato, which literally means “tied together.” This teaching by Paul is anything but a fluid, graceful, legato, Donny Hathaway ballad. In the Greek you get a closer glimpse of the crispness—“love genuine, abhorring evil, cleaving to good...in diligence, not slothful; in spirit, fervent; in season, serving; in hope, rejoicing; in tribulation, enduring; in prayer, steadfastly continuing; to the needs of the saints, communicating; hospitality, pursuing....” Why staccato? I think he’s telling us about the urgency of love in the moment and he’s being crisp and clear about it—genuine love is non-negotiable. Love is his thesis and everything else flows from that.

Through the staccato quality, he may also be suggesting something about our life together—about our disconnection and detachment from love and each other. A staccato life, a detached life, does not necessarily want to be close enough to another in order to flow legato-style like Beethoven’s “Für Elise.” Staccato notes are separated from each other. There are places in our world where we hear staccato being played—Ferguson, MO; Iraq and Syria; Russia and Ukraine; in our relationships; in our workplaces. Scenarios where people are separated from each other, detached from the practice of love. Places and spaces where it seems hate wins overwhelmingly and floods the universe with animus. Paul’s writing style is indicative of our lives. Staccato. Separate. Detached.

His imperative plea suggests an urgency. Our reality may be staccato, but Paul also teaches that love is wide and broad and has a legato quality. He starts with the immediate community then moves to the saints then to strangers then to enemies and all people. He shows that love cannot be confined to a person or a church or a fraternity or intramural club but is broad and inclusive enough to encompass the whole world because love is legato, trying to tie us all together in harmony.

Love is nondiscriminatory. “Love bade me welcome,” English poet/priest George Herbert wrote,

“yet my soul drew back,
Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-ey’d Love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
If I lack’d anything...
Truth Lord, but I have marr’d them: let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.
And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?
My dear, then I will serve.
You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:
So I did sit and eat.”

Love sees the need for communion with friend or foe, because hospitality does not discriminate. No choosing between those whom one should welcome and those whom one should not. “Love bade me welcome.” No fear where there is love. No fear of the borderlands of humanity, those who represent economic or educational or racial difference. No prerequisites to be welcomed and loved. Love moves us beyond ourselves, beyond borders, makes us bigger than we are, stretches us and shapes us more into the image and wideness of God’s mercy.

Love asserts that all bear God’s image affirming the dignity of each person. If not, our love is anorexic. 16th century Reformer, John Calvin, says, “We should not regard what a man is and what he deserves; but we should go higher—that it is God who has placed us in the world for such a purpose that we be united and joined together.” Love is a long legato that recognizes every person has value and that God is already at work in their lives, whether we see it or not because there’s “prevenient grace” (John Wesley).

This love, which is actually God’s love, will cast out fear and even set a table in the presence of evil enemies and say “sit down” and “taste my meat.” And the meat will not even be poisoned. Love’s nature is polychromatic, not homogeneous in only loving what is familiar and comfortable. It spreads a wide tent but it’s not the fuzzy, romantic, sentimental, sappy, dreamy-eyed love from a film that only includes friends, family, or lover. Those types of love—*philia* or friendship love, and *eros* or romantic love—are not as wide as God’s love, *agape*, because God’s love even challenges our usual understanding of what we mean when we say, “loved ones.” Shouldn’t every one be “a loved one”?

This is where it gets hard. This is where love gets risky and even dangerous. Think of the most notorious or heinous crime—horror of horrors. We’re called to love that person—the perpetrator. There are sayings that may make you pause—“Hit a straight lick with a crooked stick”; or, “You can’t swing a dead cat without hitting a Duke construction project.” I’m still trying to figure out the dead cat. Today, it is “Do not repay anyone evil for evil.” “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” These may cause you to scratch your head because retribution and retaliation are so much easier and perhaps give some satisfaction but in the end it will wreak devastation on your soul.

Paul’s not naïve because his letter to the Romans arrives in an atmosphere of threat and intimidation toward believers in Rome. He knows persecution is happening yet he calls for an ethic of love, humble hospitality, and commends a stance of humility: “outdo one another in showing honor”; “bless those who persecute you and do not curse them”; “do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly”; “do not claim to be wiser than you are”; “take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.” This is risky too because this hospitable love opens

oneself up to the possibility of hostility. Doing good toward another does not mean that one will respond with good toward you. Evil may be the antiphonal response so hospitality may be a host to hostilities.

When France surrendered to Nazi Germany during World War II, André Trocmé, a pastor of a Reformed congregation in the French village of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, a village of approximately 5,000 people, proclaimed that it was the responsibility of Christians to resist violence that would come their way. Over the next several years, villagers in Le Chambon, many of whom were ancestors of the persecuted Huguenots of the 16-17th centuries, provided sanctuary to over 5,000 Jews who were escaping the Nazi death camps. A former child refugee in Le Chambon said of her experience there: "Nobody asked who was Jewish and who was not. Nobody asked where you were from. Nobody asked who your father was or if you could pay. They just accepted each of us, taking us in with warmth, sheltering children, often without their parents—children who cried in the night from nightmares" (Elizabeth Koenig-Kaufman). "Love bade me welcome."

One can "hate what is evil" but still love, which is a form of holding "fast to what is good." Love in the face of evil is a form of resistance to evil and the status quo perpetuation of violence. If we repay evil with evil or violence with violence, we become the very thing we hate and the good you may want to do you won't do. "Never avenge yourselves," Paul teaches, because "the sword intended to root out violence ends up fostering it" (Miroslav Volf). History testifies to this vicious cycle. Until swords become ploughshares (Isaiah 2) those who take up the sword will perish by the sword (Matt 26:52). "Do not repay anyone evil for evil." "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

The perpetuation of tactics of evil dehumanizes the object and subject of evil. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, "The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy, instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. Through violence you may murder the liar, but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish the truth. Through violence you may murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate. Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that." This is how we know if we are growing in love—if we care for someone with whom we have the greatest difficulty.

This is nothing less than the risky and redemptive, wide, wide love of God in Christ. Stand your ground laws do not make one secure because as the hymn declares, "all other ground is sinking sand" compared to the solid rock of Christ. Jesus is the example for this inclusive and risky love, which is why Paul draws not only on the Jewish wisdom traditions for his instructions but on the Jesus tradition found in scripture (cf. Prov 3:7; Is 5:21; Prov 3:4; Prov 25:21-22; Ps 34:14 ; Lk 6:28; Mt 5:44, 25:35). Paul has Jesus in mind—his love, his way. He had nails in his hands as he was surrounded by evil and killed because of evil. Jesus "broke the vicious cycle of violence by absorbing it, taking it upon himself [on a cross]. He refused to be sucked into the automatism of revenge, but sought to overcome evil by doing good—even at the cost of his life" (Volf). The crucified Messiah "is not a concealed legitimation of the system of terror, but its radical critique. Far from enthroning violence, the sacralization of him as victim subverts violence" (Volf). Cruciform love was his response to and means of undermining evil and hate because in the words of poet Audre Lorde, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." Jesus didn't choose the way of domination and oppression but the subversive way of nonviolent love to dismantle evil and deal a fatal blow to Death and all its evil minions.

Christ put his hands up and out to surrender so that God could embrace us in his loving arms. "I've decided to stick with love" not only because "hate is too great a burden to bear" (King) but because "God is love" (1 John 4:8) and "I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8). That's the power of God's love and it is the real love supreme.