

**Message**  
**August 27-28, 2011**  
**Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28**  
**Love**

It's been quite a stormy week. On Tuesday the East Coast shook from Virginia to Boston with a 5.9 Richter scale earthquake. This is big for us, as Virginia is not accustomed to having earthquakes. In a message from Bishop Shannon this week, we learned of churches surrounding the epicenter and beyond, that suffered some significant damage. St. Stephen's, Culpeper is worshiping in their parish hall for the unforeseeable future. They've suffered so much damage their worship space is now condemned. All churches have been advised to have their space inspected by an expert engineer to detect any hidden or visible damage. We are blessed with the loving attention of Mark Hansell who lickety split was on the campus to give us a thumbs up. Christ Church is safe and secure. Then, on Wednesday we received news of a code purple air quality alert. A wildfire in The Great Dismal Swamp, just south of us, has been raging for more than two weeks. The smoke from the fire apparently is emitting the most unhealthy air we can breathe. And, just as we were re-adjusting our sleep patterns from the aftershocks of the earthquake shaking us up in the middle of the night, more unsettling news began to filter. Now, we're riding out the aftermath of Hurricane Irene rumbling up the coast, having plummeted North Carolina, Virginia, and on up through Boston, impacting some 65 million people.

We're having a pretty tumultuous week. And, this is just the nature of climate I'm been talking about! But, you know how we do things here with Christ Church. We take care of one another. This is the way of the church; the way of faithful people. When we get a shaken up; when we're doubtful, we suck in our next breath in comfort. We batten down the hatches and hold on tight with the assurance of calm and peace on the horizon. We remember to count our blessings when we find we've not been injured or hurt in falling rubble. We give thanks for clean air when the sun shines brightly and the wind blows with a refreshing breeze. And, we surrender to God those things we simply cannot control as we watch flood waters recede. Weeks like this tell us point blank of just how much is truly out of our control. We can't determine when the tides will shift, or when the seas will roar. All too often these kinds of weeks are those reminders for us of our dependence on God's saving grace; God's love for us. Our story is an ever changing, fluid stream, or sometimes a blustery wind, blowing apart what we know to be secure and safe. But, as is always the case, God's love is the epicenter of our very being, always clearing for us a path of opportunity and newness. This is our God who loves us so deeply and wants so much to be loved in return.

So, this is a long way of saying, today, I'd like to talk with you about love...not so much the love that makes our hearts flutter and the palms of our hands get all sweaty. But, the love of God, given to us in the life, death and resurrection of God's son, Jesus Christ. A love, rooted firmly within us. A love that grows and grows as it is practiced with one another, practiced in community, a gathering of faithful people, living in response to God's love, and putting us into action. A way to treat one another, with trust, and

honesty, integrity and just plain old, hard work; a love where we can expect the very best from one another; and reach well past the expectations we've settled on to honor God's expectations for us.

Today, as we near the end of the apostle's letter to the church in Rome, Paul teaches us how to practice love. There is a lot we can say about the power of this book of Romans. It's a masterpiece radically misunderstood and miraculously life changing. Great thinkers throughout our Christian story: Augustine of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Martin Luther at the Reformation; John Wesley in his conversion to Methodism, and more modern Karl Barth have formed their story largely because of God's word inspiring them in the book of Romans. Tomes have been written interpreting Paul's letter to the Romans. But, one over arching theme rings forth throughout the book. The apostle writes to a group of Christians, about living in a right relationship with God; about living in response to God's love. A God who begins our story with Adam, covenants with Abraham, the Israelites, the Jews and the Gentiles, journeying along with them, forever faithful, always redeeming their story, always loving, giving and forgiving, in the story of Jesus Christ who lives and dies for us. We challenge God's story for us with our day to day realities. We hurt and wound and hate. But, our God is just and right and rescues us from evil, dramatically, gloriously changing our story forever. In Christ, we are promised a right relationship with God, deeply rooted and grounded in love. This is Romans, in a nutshell.

Theologian and scholar, Walter Brueggemann argues that people change when they are given a reason to change, a new possibility, a promising opportunity. Hearts and minds are moved to change when reality is interpreted through a different lens. Our story takes on a new chapter. The apostle didn't know Walter Brueggemann. Their lives are distanced by some 19 centuries. But, the apostle evangelizes about what Brueggemann teaches. God first loved us so that we may love. The apostle writes to a community of faithful Christians up against some life choices and the challenge of change. The Church in Rome is a melting pot of Jews and Gentiles; a people of different cultures, thrown together now as one family, challenged to be united in their differences in loving the Lord. He calls them to take on the indiscriminate character of love.

"Love what is genuine, what is sincere, without pretence," he writes. In other words, mean it when we love. Show true love. Don't fake it. May our actions be pure. He uses two words for love in this passage, agape and phillia. You've heard us talk about these loves before. Agape is divine love; how Jesus loves. No one can agape like Jesus. But, he asks us to give it our best shot. Agape love means, loving without an agenda. About meeting the legitimate needs of the other without expecting anything in return. Sacrificial love; and don't be hypocritical about giving agape love. Practice loving like Jesus. "Hate what is evil; stick to what is good." In the whole of the New Testament, this is the only time the Greek word for hate is used. It means to abhor. In other words, we abhor, we detest whatever it is that takes us away from practicing loving. Our greatest evil is indifference; to have no care of wrongs done to others. To truly love with agape love, means we can't stand still for what is wrong. We holy hate what is evil. We

stick to what is good. We hold fast. In fact, God has slathered good all over us. We're actually super glued in good.

“Love one another with mutual affection.” The first thing we do, the apostle says, in our super glued love, is phillias. We brotherly love. We most readily see the word phillias in the word, Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love. The apostle tells us to do the Philadelphia thing. Of course, brotherly and sisterly bonds, outside of family are not unfamiliar. Early on, Jews, as a community, viewed themselves as brothers to one another. Ancient Essenes and other religious communal groups understood the bonds of brotherly connection. The Christians, however, coined phillias, brotherly *love*. Bound together as brothers and sisters, saying yes to God, under the covenant love of parent God, Christians saw themselves as united in brotherly, sisterly love not seen elsewhere.

Living in Christian love, in agape, self sacrificing love, in phillias, brotherly love, may, for some of us be a greater reach than we feel we can muster. But, consider this: that God's love for us is so planted within us, that we are more than capable of living in agape and phillias. Our job is to honor the love, respond to the love within us. Loving like Jesus is action, for sure, and in a minute, I'm going to talk about the importance of serving; our greatest responsibility in demonstrating God's love. Sometimes, however, love is more in our words than our actions. Loving like Jesus is an invitation to having fierce conversations; to peer deep inside and see in one another the true love God has for us, to serve as agents of trust and truth and possibility for one another.

In the early eighties, while teaching at Yale, Henri Nouwen befriended a young New York Times reporter, Fred Bratman. Someone suggested he interview Nouwen as a human interest story. But, the truth is, he wasn't really very interested in Nouwen or what he had to say. As the interview came to a close, Nouwen, frustrated by Bratman's indifference, finally asked Bratman, “Tell me, do you like your job?” “Not really,” said Bratman. “I love to write, but, not this way, it's frustrating. But, I'm just a simple journalist, and I guess I should be content.” “No, you shouldn't,” said Nouwen. “You should claim your deepest desire.” “What do you really want,” asked Nouwen. “I want to write a novel,” said Bratman. Hearing his true desire, love poured from Nouwen. Nouwen pushed Bratman. Nouwen suggested he give up his steady paying job to follow his dream. Bratman, ready to make his exit, offered some compliant words. Finally, Nouwen, overwhelmed by an immense love for this brother who failed to recognize God's gifts in himself, reached out and said the impossible. “Fred, give up your job, come here for a year and write your novel. I'll get the money somehow.” Nouwen made good on the offer, and Fred came to live in New Haven as a writer in residence.

The years passed. Nouwen and Bratman remained friends as their friendship weathered stories of rejection and resentment, joy and celebration. Then one day, after some conversation, Fred asked Nouwen to write a book about God's world for people who live in the secular world: People who don't walk around all day long living in response to God's love. People who doubt their ability; who wonder too often if God's grace really does win out in the end. The secular Bratman said, “Speak to us about love, with the

same conviction you speak to those who actively spend their lives relishing in the glory of God's love."

So, Nouwen wrote a book and called it, Life of the Beloved and sent it off to Fred for a critical edit and review. Fred, by now a published author, happily married and soon to be a father, offered up the conversation in love. He found the book well written but really not any different from Nouwen's previous work. Bartman was not converted. In his effort to serve as a faithful witness of God's love in a secular world, Nouwen felt defeated. In the end, Nouwen's only response to Bartman, was what he knew to be true. "For me," he said, "God is the one who calls me the Beloved, and I have a desire to express to others how I try to become more fully who I already am...because of God's love." Bartman and Nouwen carried on their friendship, grateful for the love, honesty and trust that united them in their differences. Then, as is always the way with God, blessings blossomed. Nouwen sent the book to some "church" people in Washington, D.C. and in England. They loved the book. Nouwen expressed his concern that the secular world would not respond to his book. "Not to worry", replied his church friends, "you might not have been able to write all that Fred needs to hear, but Fred enabled you to write what we need to hear...be happy with that."

We just never know how God's love planted so deep within us equips us to be genuine, active lovers in God's kingdom. Often practicing love is simply showing up; being willing to walk along, share the good and the not so good; listen really well; say the necessary words for the moment and be willing to love in the conversation. Jesus commands that we love one another as he loves us. And, when words are not enough, when our actions speak louder than words, we practice love in reaching out to one another. We do what the apostle teaches and what Christ Church does really well. We help the helpless. We share with those in need. We humbly pray for others, including those who hate us. We seek peace, not revenge. We rejoice with others when they rejoice. We share sadness with those in sorrow. We care for all, even our enemies. We conquer evil. Preacher and teacher, Barbara Brown Taylor says, "the only way to conquer evil is to absorb it. Take it into yourself and disarm it. Neutralize its acids....suck it up, put a straightjacket on it and turn it over to God, so that when you breathe out again the air is pure." The apostle reminds us, that as the church, we master evil with good, everywhere, all the time.

Now, you remember, a couple of weeks ago, I presented you with a faith challenge: to go and serve and give, of your time, talent and treasure, as a sign of Jesus' love given for us. Many of you have let me know already how you're serving, how you're giving of your gifts in service and in financial offerings. Thank you. This is a true gift to me to hear of these actions of love. Please, keep practicing your love, and let me know how Jesus' love grows and spreads as you touch the lives of others and others touch your lives.

This has been a stormy, shaky week. Our climate is shifting. Change is upon us. The road for serving as a faithful Christian community may, in fact, look a little bumpy right now. Jesus reminds us, if we want to follow him, we will take up the cross. To gain our

life, we will lose it only to find it in the love of Jesus Christ, so deeply rooted within us, the very essence of who we are.

Continue to practice love, my dear friends. There is no greater love than this love from Jesus. You love really well. This love is ours, yours and mine, to grab hold of, and more importantly, ours to give away. And in so doing, the Story of God's love, our story, grows bigger and more generous in love. So, beloved, we join together; we follow Jesus. We share the gifts so generously bestowed upon us by God. We devote ourselves to loving, to serving, trusting always in the beauty of God's love for us.