

Sermon preached at Roseville Uniting Church by Rev. Laurel Barr

on Sunday 7th August 2011

Romans 12:9-21 “Let love be genuine”

Today is a special day in the life of our congregation. We are together around the Lord’s Table. We are a community on a journey together. We have prayed and made strategic decisions about mission in our desire to faithfully grow the church for the next generations. Yet change has had its challenges. It is hard work and we have mixed feelings about it and even feel anxious. Yet we also feel hope, excitement and anticipation. In the midst of it all as your Minister I am inspired by the depth of faith and creativity and service I see among you.

We are endowed with committed and gifted lay leadership. As a congregation we have many gifts – spiritual gifts which each one of us bring. We are also a community of many parts across the generations. Increasingly we come from different cultures and theological traditions. We offer activities for different age groups and interests and needs. We worship in a variety of services and styles. This afternoon we will have a special children’s service. Last Friday about thirty young people worshipped at *Spark*. We have mid-week worship and of course our two morning worship services. I believe that diversity is part of God’s plan: We are many and yet we are all part of one body. We belong together in Christ.

In Romans Chapter 12 Paul is talking about what it means for us to live together in our diversity as the body of Christ – each one of us valued – each essential – each called to reach our potential to be the persons God intended for us to be.

And now he exhorts us: **Let love be genuine!** The most important thing about us as Christ’s community is that our love for each other and for others is lived out. A single stick is easy to break. However sticks tied together are strong and difficult, if not impossible, to break. It is love that binds us together into community and calls forth what we have to offer each other and to the world as we fulfill our calling.

But what is love? What is this love which binds us together and makes such a difference? Love can mean many things in our culture and love in Paul’s letter here is not about what I want or need or even like. It is not about “I” or “Me” or even feelings. The Greek word here for love is *agape* and *agape* puts the well-being of another first. It turns us towards each other. It is love that does not dominate but rather shares life with others. It is self-giving love that builds community by binding us to each other.

I don’t know a lot about long distance running but I read* that “good distance runners don’t just repeat over and over to themselves general messages in their minds like “Relax!” and “Stay loose” while they are running. They play much more specific messages over and over in their minds like “Let lower lip sag!” and “Feel how loose my fingers are right now!” And these specific messages help their whole bodies to relax and stay loose.”

And it’s the same Paul says for a community to live in love. This passage is packed with very specific ideas and advice for living in love. And in the short time I have this morning I want to lift out three words for us to play over and over in our life together here in Roseville – three marks of Christian living.

As brothers and sisters with Christ, Paul says, let us love one another by showing mutual affection and mutual respect. And so the first idea is **affirm**.

We each receive messages all the time that tell us whether we are lovable, good, useful and valuable or not.** Our sense of self-worth and of being accepted is central to whether we experience well-being or pain. I don't know about you but when I feel good about myself I can take on the world and tackle problems. And I can cope with sadness and setbacks better, and contribute with confidence. When I feel bad about myself, everything seems that much harder and I do not feel free to contribute. I freeze and I stumble over things that at other times I can do well.

I was saddened to see among the obituaries in the Sydney Morning Herald this week one for the Reverend Dr John Stott. John Stott, as rector of All Souls Anglican Church in London and in many other roles made an enormous impact as an evangelical leader in the world-wide church. I met him when I was a young university student attending the annual Australian Fellowship of Evangelical Students conference which was being held at the Australian National University in Canberra.

John Stott led the Bible Studies and I remember being particularly moved by his exposition of John Chapter 15 about Jesus as the vine and we the branches. In fact when I was asked as a theological student many years later to produce a tapestry of my life and faith and I thought of many influences that had shaped me over the years, John Stott's Bible Studies was one of them. And so there is a square of the vine on the patchwork quilt I produced.

I believe one of the reasons those particular studies impacted me so much was that one morning when I was sitting at breakfast in the student dining hall at Burton Hall I found myself sitting next to John Stott. I was very shy and awkward. He was the great guru at whose feet we sat at the time. We had all read his book *Basic Christianity*. What could I say to him and not embarrass myself? Why would he want to talk with me? And yet he showed great interest in who I was, a second year music student from Adelaide University wanting to be a teacher and as the group around us grew we tarried and the conversation continued. Throughout that conference John Stott's genuine humility and the way he made us each feel valued was something that impacted upon many of us. And for me, his interest and encouragement authenticated his words.

Are we a community of affirmation? Do we encourage each other? How do you intentionally show an interest in what someone else in the congregation is doing – especially if that person attends a different worship service or activity or is older or younger? Are not our chats after worship or as one worshipping congregation arrives and another leaves important? Is not a warm smile of recognition, a simple gesture of appreciation, some attention paid to small children, drawing someone who is standing alone into our conversations, learning each other's names - all part of being a community of affirmation?*** Our Visiting month which we launch today is also about affirmation.

In our busyness and focus upon what we are doing, how do we make space for people in their sadness or to share their good news and gladness? I delight in the Gospel stories when Jesus made space for the little children and their anxious mothers to come and be with him, and when he allowed his urgent journey to heal Jairus' daughter to be interrupted as he turned to heal and affirm the faith of an older woman who tugged at the hem of his robe. Even when Jesus seemed reluctant and irritated when a Canaanite woman interrupted his time of rest and recreation and Jesus said - I am here primarily for the Jewish people, why should I give you any attention? Even then his compassion won out and he affirmed her and her faith also. So then- **affirm!**

And the second idea for us to carry in our minds and hearts is **include**. In case we simply become a self-serving happy community just caring for ourselves and our friends, Paul widens the circle. None of us has all wisdom Paul says. Be open to each other in your diversity. And he says be hospitable to strangers; people on the edge, people who come into their community from outside, new comers to Roseville and

our community including migrants and refugees, others who have had a long association with this community but whom we might not know yet.

And he reminds us that we are not just here for ourselves but part of the wider church serving in the nation and in the world. Along his missionary journeys Paul was raising money for the saints – the believers in Jerusalem. He invites the Romans and he invites us to make contributions to those in need beyond our community. Genuine love loves with all our resources in the local scene and in the wider scene. *** Tomorrow Roseville Uniting Church is hosting the Synod Board of Mission Thanksgiving service where we can hear about work in the wider church – and in the next two months we will welcome to our services a neighboring minister, a speaker from Frontier Services and from uniting world.

Affirm – include and the third idea is **be gracious**.

Paul gives a lot of specific and practical advice about overcoming divisions and conflict in community. We read *Live peaceably together if you possibly can*. Of course building relationships involves two parties but don't, urges Paul, be the one who doesn't do everything you possibly can to get on with others. There are echoes of the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel, when Paul urges us to bless those who persecute us and not to pay back those who hurt us. It is so easy to become resentful against those we feel do not support us or even oppose us or who we feel are threatening the things which we value.

And then Paul quotes from Proverbs 25:21-22 about offering kindness and hospitality to hungry and thirsty enemies. And he makes that curious comment that when we do this we "heap burning coals on their heads". Does he mean that by doing good towards those who do not like us we will increase God's judgment upon them? Or does Paul mean that including even those who do not like us in our circle of care may help that person to change?* In the spirit of this passage I believe that the second option the most likely explanation.

Friends we all have shortcomings. We all slip up from time to time and cause offense but the advice of Paul can be summed up by saying: **Be gracious! Be gracious** towards one another as God has been gracious towards us.

There's a powerful story that comes to us out of the Native American tradition. One day a grandfather said to his grandson, "I feel as if I have two wolves fighting in my heart. One wolf is unforgiving, angry and violent. The other wolf is loving, kind, and compassionate." The grandson asked him, "Which wolf will win the fight in your heart?" The grandfather answered, "The one I feed."****

Affirm. Include. Be Gracious. If we play those words over and over in our minds we feed what is kind and compassionate and loving. "Let love be genuine" said Paul and in this way "hold onto what is good indeed overcome evil with good". Here is the kingdom of God breaking in.

And as we gather together around this table of the Lord to feed upon the bread -Jesus Christ's body broken for us - and drink from the cup of God's forgiveness, we feed upon and drink *agape* love in its purest and most profound expression. Here we celebrate how goodness overcame hatred and fear, evil and death through love.

Let love be genuine!

Here in our diversity is the heart of what it means to be "the body of Christ".

*Mark Reasoner, Commentary on Second Reading, www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=8/31/2008&tab=3

***Pastoral Partner Program*, Creative Congregations Series, p.33

***William Loader, Pentecost 11, First Thoughts on Year A Epistle Passages from the Lectionary, www.staff.murdoch.edu.au/~leader/AEPentecost11.htm

*****Seasons of the Spirit Congregational Life Pentecost1* ,p.98

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