**Genuine Love**

Jeremiah 15:15-21
Romans 12:9-21

 Given the Apostle Paul’s overall attitude about marriage, I am guessing Paul was not asked to officiate at very many weddings. Some young couple from Corinth is about to tie the knot and the groom says to the bride, “Let’s ask Paul if he will do the ceremony.” The groom replies, have you read the last letter he sent to the congregation? Paul essentially says, “If you can’t control your sexual urges than go ahead and get married, otherwise it would be better if you stayed single, like me.” To which the prospective bride replies, “I wonder if Apollos is available?”

 More than likely most couples took a pass on asking Paul to officiate at their weddings. Yet, those who had the courage to invite Paul to share in their special day were never disappointed. In spite of the fact he essentially sees marriage as the best option for those of us unable to control our passion; Paul does recognize the deep connection between love manifest on a personal level and love manifest on a social level. When in our letter to the Romans, Paul says “Let love be genuine,” Paul means let love permeate, inform and guide every aspect of our lives as individuals, as a community of faith and may that love be a transforming presence in our world.

 What Paul offers as advice to a couple beginning a life together, also applies to the local church and the dream of God for the world as a whole. “Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.” Next time the prospective groom starts taking an I know best, superior then thou, haughty attitude, toward his wife, he will do well to remember the Apostle Paul’s admonition about love. Next time the prospective bride holds onto a grudge, she will do well to remember the Apostle Paul’s admonition about love. So too will the churches of Rome, Corinth, Galatia, St. Paul, Minnesota.

When Paul talks about genuine love he is talking about what it takes to create community in which love can flourish. Paul knows the love reflected in our personal relationships, the love bonding us together in community, is the love through which the transforming presence of God is made known in our world. If you are concerned about the shooting of a young African American man in Ferguson, the police officer killed at Smith and Dodd, the person shot this week by police at the Holiday Gas station here on the West Side than according to Paul we are called to be attentive to the transforming potential of love in our intimate relationships and our communities of faith, knowing it is this love that enables us not to be overcome by evil, but to overcome evil with good.

The Apostle Paul is keenly aware that we are all socialized into the values and a mind set of imperial powers like Rome. From childhood on we receive messages that divide us rather than unite us, puts our individual drives ahead of the needs of others, celebrates dominance and looks upon compassion as weakness. This is why Paul says, “Let love be genuine”. It acknowledges that love can be less than genuine. Love can have a façade that looks like love on the outside, but like one of those fake Hollywood sets, there is no community behind what otherwise look like real buildings.

Many of you know that I did have the privilege this past month of officiating at a wedding for a niece here in St. Paul and then a week later, a nephew in New York. For each wedding I offered a meditation that included a personal story that I hoped would shed light on love, not only as it applied to the couple standing before me, but also as it applied to all of those gathered, as well as the reality and implications of God’s love at work in our world.

Here is the story I told about my nephew Justin. Each summer, we join my wife, Michele’s family for a week on the beach at Fire Island, just off the coast of Long Island. It was just two summers ago that Justin had one of his most active weeks at the beach ever. If there was something taking place, Justin was involved.

In and of itself, there would be nothing surprising about Justin’s level of activity. What made it in an unusual week for Justin is that he was barely there. He had a conflict that summer, so his mom Laura decided to bring a full size cardboard cutout version of Justin that she had had made for his High School graduation. Before the week was over Justin had played Frisbee with my son, caught some rays on the beach, went wake boarding and paddle boarding in the ocean, shared a beer with his cousin Chris, posed for a group pictures with all the cousins, and with broom in hand helped clean up. If Justin had actually been there all week, he would have been one tired guy. But, with the help of his cousins, it was the cut out card board version of Justin who did all those things. This is all thoroughly documented in our family calendar.

 I pointed out to Justin and Katie and all those gathered that the temptation at times is strong to go get that one dimensional, cut out version of ourselves and put it, rather than our true selves, in relationship with the one to whom we have committed our lives. A cut out representation is what we bring out when it feels safer and easier than the challenges that can come with real love. It is true for a young couple beginning a life together as they face conflict or times of stress, it is true for communities of faith who have grown comfortable with the way things are, it is true for nations who talk about the values and importance of peace, mutual respect, but whose primary investments are in weapons and the tools of war. It is so much easier to get out that cut out card board version of who we propose to be than it is to grapple with the meaning and radical implications of genuine love.

 The story I told about my Niece Renee came from her early years at a family gathering on my parent’s dairy farm. Renee was about three at the time. Renee’s aunts, uncles and Grandma were all gathered together for dinner. The roast beef, mashed potatoes, rolls, gravy and carrots were all on the table as we enjoyed a meal that we had eaten pretty much every Sunday growing up. Although, there were no longer any cows being milked in the barn and the land was now farmed by a neighbor, the family dinner still looked, tasted, and smelled just like it always had. As often accompanied a family meal, there was a fair amount of laughter. I no longer remember what was so funny; maybe someone had stolen a piece of roast beef from someone else’s plate and gotten away with it. Whatever it was, the laughter was a little more vigorous than usual. It was then than Renee took charge and in her most commanding 3 year old voice boldly instructed us, “No laughing.”

 If the reason for Renee’s command stemmed from an innate dislike of laughter, Renee would have been in for a very long childhood. After all Renee is the daughter of my brother Sheldon, who positioned an ugly and scary coconut head, just at the bottom of their cellar steps, so that his daughters could see it peering up at them, every time they walked by. He found a dead bat and nailed it to the wall on their cabin, as a permanent decoration. Having a sense of humor in Renee’s family is more than being able to laugh at a good joke, it’s a survival skill.

 But, I don’t think humor was really the issue for Renee at the tender age of three. The issue for Renee was a challenge we encounter at every age and at its core is what draws a couple into the bonds of marriage. Renee wanted to be included. She didn’t understand what was funny. Renee felt left out of the humor and so she did the thing that made a sense to a three year old, she boldly proclaimed her objection and resistance to feeling excluded “no laughing”. I went on to point out resistance to exclusion is, of course, what was behind the drive to make Minnesota a state that extends marriage to all, rejecting the exclusion of LGBT citizens. Resistance to exclusion is what motivated the civil rights movement and women’s rights advocacy and all movements for full inclusion.

 For the Apostle Paul, genuine love is about creating communities of faith where the reality of inclusion is real and through which the transformative power of God’s love is made known. There is nothing naïve about Paul’s understanding of love and the challenge of loving genuinely. Paul is fully aware that the narrative of God’s love in our lives and in our world runs counter to the popular social narrative of domination, privilege, and exclusion. Yet Paul firmly believes that genuine love manifest in a community of faith can be the agent of God’s transforming love at work in our world.

 It is easy to fall into the cynical belief that the powers of domination, exploitation, greed and exclusion are too strong and there is nothing we can do to make a difference. If there is a city that often has an image of being impersonal, each one for themselves, it is probably New York City. Here is what Michele and I experienced as we spent a week exploring New York following our nephew’s wedding. Every day we found ourselves in a subway or on a street corner with map in hand as we tried to ascertain where we were and the direction we needed to head in terms of where we wanted to go. Every day, more than once, a New Yorker, attentive to our uncertainty, came up to us without prompting and helped us get headed in the right direction. Once as we were standing in a subway, wondering out loud if it was the right train to take, a man over heard our conversation and before getting on the fast approaching train he needed, showed us where we needed to go. There are millions of people in New York. We only encountered a handful or so in these situations, but that handful of people left us with the feeling that New Yorkers are people who care.

 Paul knows that this is how genuine love works and why it so vital for communities of faith like ours to be agents of that love. Let love be genuine. It is a message for couples committing their lives together, it is a message for congregations such as ours, it is a message that enables us “not to be overcome by evil, but to overcome evil with good”.

**Jeremiah 15:15-21**

*In our first lesson we are reminded by the prophet Jeremiah that true love, genuine love is far from easy and sometimes can be the source of pain and agony. The passage begins with Jeremiah acknowledging and struggling with the challenges that have come his way as result of remaining faithful to God. But, as the passage continues to unfold we hear the reassuring word of God encouraging Jeremiah and encouraging us all to place our trust in the God who continues to redeem.*

O Lord, you know; remember me and visit me, and bring down retribution for me on my persecutors. In your forbearance do not take me away; know that on your account I suffer insult.Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart; for I am called by your name, O Lord, God of hosts. I did not sit in the company of merrymakers, nor did I rejoice; under the weight of your hand I sat alone, for you had filled me with indignation. Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable refusing to be healed? Truly, you are to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail. Therefore, thus says the Lord: If you turn back, I will take you back, and you shall stand before me. If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall serve as my mouth. It is they who will turn to you, not you who will turn to them. And I will make you to this people a fortified wall of bronze; they will fight against you, but they shall not prevail over you, for I am with you to save you and deliver you, says the Lord. I will deliver you out of the hand of the wicked, and redeem you from the grasp of the ruthless.

**Romans 12:9-21**
*In this letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul offers words of encouragement about letting love among them be genuine. Paul is about the business of shaping communities of faith who by their very nature not only proclaim, but also live out a way of being in relationship that stands in sharp contrast to the dominant relationships so common in Rome and society as a whole.*

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.