

**Sermon – 13<sup>th</sup> Pentecost**  
**Romans 12:9-21 & Matthew 25:31-46**  
**September 3, 2017**  
**“A Work Yes - But was it Good?”**

It's not hard to think about the veritable ocean of need in SE Texas and be both moved and determined to find a way to respond, and there's time to ponder how to do that. In our homes every day, with our kids or aging spouses we figure out how to love them when love calls for more than a quick wipe of the face or help getting out of the tub. Those are reflexive, the need is met, maybe you'll do it different next time but you'll have other chances.

But what about those times when persons who enter our lives and you know, or ought to know, that their situation is not of the “quick fix” variety? Sometimes the ironies of life are almost too obvious for words. On Friday, I was in my office trying to think of a way to enter these lessons, when suddenly motioning to me through my office window was a woman and a wheel chair bound child, obviously wanting to talk to me. ‘God’, I thought to myself, ‘*is this for real - I’m reading Matthew 25 and Romans 12 and you arrange this?*’ My aim is not to turn another human being into a gratuitous sermon illustration so much as to convey that like you, I struggle with how to live out Bible lessons like the ones we have today.

When someone is at your window and their face says, “*I need help*” calendars sort of go out the window and you have a fellow traveler on this earth whose precious life is for the moment at lease caught up in your busy one. I won't encumber you with the details other than to say I thank you that as a congregation you place resources at my disposal to respond to such folks even as I wrestle mightily, as I know you have, with whether what I did and my motives for doing it were adequate.

The dilemma for me during and in the immediate aftermath of such encounters is twofold. The first is the most obvious – Jesus said in Matthew 25 that was very likely him standing outside my window the other day. The second, less obvious for me and I'll leave it at that – was whether my response was genuinely loving. Did I honor the person(s) in my midst for no other reason that they too were created in the image of God? Did I even begin to show what for Paul and Jesus is a big deal – so much so they describe it as essential to being a Christian - hospitality?

Most of us have learned how to express kindness - or at least politeness. We might call it “Midwestern nice.” We've learned to manage to make our gestures, tone of voice and facial expressions convey interest and empathy. But are we really interested or moved by what we hear - do we really feel what someone feels? Is it really indignation over some injustice they've suffered or happiness for them when they've done something well?

Romans 12:9 says “*let love be sincere.*” Love is a tall task in the first place, because sometimes it has to jump the line and do the right thing even if we can't say we *like* what we're supposed to do or the person we're doing it for. That was my dilemma the other day. I didn't know the person at my window from Adam. But to the command to love Paul adds the proviso that our love be sincere – the word used to in our lesson to convey a Greek word that is best translated as “un-hypocritical.” And who wants to be a hypocrite!

Paul then says, “*honor one another above yourselves.*” Jesus, in Matthew 23:6 warned about those “*who seek the places of honor at banquets*” among the Jews. But lest we lay all this off on leaders, remember of the entire people of Israel Jesus, quoting the Prophet Isaiah once said, “*these people honor me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.*” We can honor someone so they’ll give a contribution to our cause or an employee so they’ll work harder or an employer so they’ll think “big raise” next time! But can we, do we, honor someone simply because they are created in the image of God and not for some ulterior motive?

Finally, Paul says “*practice hospitality.*” But what he meant by hospitality is different than our modern entertaining. Entertaining, as sincere as ours may be, usually brings some benefit to the host – as in “*my does she make a fabulous prime rib*” or “*say, have you seen the Olson’s new dining room.*” Entertaining can demand impeccable table settings, great and abundant food, and of course – a thoroughly relaxed host and hostess! But Paul urges hospitality focused entirely on the guest – and while this is not to say our entertaining does not - hospitality of the sort Paul urges is a disposition, never an exhibition. It seeks to put into practice love and honor. It seeks the welfare of the guest and can happen over a bowl of canned soup in a messy kitchen. Hospitality was the signet ring of the church, with one another and to others. It was the sign that Christ was both guest and host of their gatherings.

Little of this was running through my mind on Friday when I looked out my office window. But Paul isn’t just offering up a Ms. Manners lesson in how to be “*Roman nice.*” There’s a lot of “practice” in this lesson, as well as in Matthew – all of which leads inevitably to the truth that the practice of Christianity takes practice, or as one of my teachers once opined – *acting like a Christian can lead you to become one!* Luther said good works are anything “*commanded by God and done by faith.*” That gives a lot of room with which to work - and a lot of forgiveness to work under. The Epistle of James said, “*faith without works is dead*” – but you’re not – you’re alive in Jesus so you simply won’t let that be said of you. Paul raises the bar high in this lesson. But he’s in the company of Jesus is so doing.

Which is why Paul raises these topics in the first place by way of Romans 12:1 – “*I urge you therefore, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice.*” You have been shown mercy and that makes it supremely possible for you to show mercy. So pick something – our current mission of the month, or the ocean of need in Texas, or maybe the guy with the “*anything helps*” sign on the freeway exit. I’ll keep an eye out for my Friday friend. Difficult as these are, we can confront the Christian life because Christ was raised upon a cross, raised from a grave, and has such a sincere love of sinners that he will raise you up to enjoy the hospitality of heaven - a host who will simply not be outdone. AMEN