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Let love be genuine... Romans 12:9a (NRSV)

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“Happy Fathers’ Day”. This is a word many people will be sharing with others around them on this day: “Happy Fathers’ Day”. But what does this mean? We need to acknowledge that in many different ways this is not a ‘Happy Fathers’ Day” for some people. We do not need to list the various ways this may be the case, but we are aware of this in so many ways. Another area, however, where the notion of a “Fathers’ Day” may one day be questioned has to do with the whole notion of ‘marriage and family’, and who indeed may be a ‘father’ one day...

How will the whole ‘same-sex-marriage’ discussion in Australia at the moment affect things such as “Fathers’ Day”? It is not my intention this day to discuss these matters, but to ask that people be informed before casting a vote one way or another in the up-coming postal survey. It is helpful, however, to be reminded of our Lutheran Church’s Statements on these matters:

<https://lca.box.com/shared/static/qgsdseoz8m8ggzjbq1gsqi3vc1vxa8st.pdf> and <https://lca.box.com/shared/static/mrjzhsgnmgspxyuj4v5vps387rw78lad.pdf> and <http://lcaenews.createsend1.com/t/t-l-kijhjd-l-d/> and <http://www.lca.org.au/8264-2/>).

What does it mean to ‘love someone’? In what way ought this ‘love’ be ‘shown’?

When we come to the Gospel Reading for this day (Matthew 16:21-28) we gain a radical view of what ‘love’ is really all about. Consider the Gospel for today: Jesus said that He was going to Jerusalem to suffer and die. Consider what *you* might say to someone who said they were going to do this (What would you say? Consider also Peter’s response...). Furthermore, as Jesus spoke about His suffering and death He said that His followers are to ‘take up their cross’ and follow Him. Remember – this was in the time when crucifixions were commonplace (think also of actual crucifixions occurring right now in the Middle East). Jesus’ words are confronting and radical – take up a device of great torture and execution, and follow Jesus?! We often blithely and with little thought and meditation sing songs about ‘taking up the cross’, but do we really understand what this means (and how absurd it may sound)?

The Christian Faith is a radical faith – make no mistakes about this. And when it comes to the Reading before us today (Romans 12:9-21) we need to keep in mind the radical nature of the faith – otherwise we may simply ‘sentimentalise’ such words into ‘nice thoughts’ and miss the truly radical nature of Jesus’ words here...

The Apostle Paul says that ‘love must be sincere’ (Rom.12:9). The Greek word here for love is ‘agape’ (which we will reflect upon a little more in a moment). But the actual Greek construction here is: ‘Let love be unhyprocritical’. ‘Love is to ‘fair dinkum’ and ‘genuine’. It is not to be like the love of an actor playing a part. It is to be genuine and from the heart. Such love was at the very heart of the teaching of Jesus. For with regard to our fellow-Christians Jesus said, ‘This I command you, that you love one another as I have loved you’ (John 15:12). And this ‘love’ is not

about your thoughts or 'feelings'. It's about something entirely different. True love is an act of the will over the emotions. The Bible says, "This is love: not that we loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for sin' (1 John 4:10). This has a 'double side' to it (and we will get to the second part – the love of Jesus – in a moment). But our 'example' for 'love' here is Jesus. He suffered and died on a cross out of love! And He calls us to be similarly willing to 'sacrifice self' out of 'love' for others.

Our translations do not catch all the words that have love in the opening verses of this section. The section begins with the heading, "Let love be genuine". The next verse, Romans 12:10, literally begins by saying, "In brotherly/sisterly love be lovingly affectionate". Of course many of the specific commands give practical, detailed ways for loving others. Verse 13 ends with the phrase pursuing hospitality, but Paul's word for hospitality is literally love of stranger. So there is a lot of love language here!

Our example for how to love is Jesus. Paul's words to bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse in verse 14 sound a lot like what Jesus says in Matthew 5:44, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you", or what Jesus says in Luke 6:28, "Bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you". There are other allusions to sayings of Jesus in the rest of chapter 13, and Jesus' love for others at the cross is stressed in Romans 15:1-3.

And all this is done in the sense of continual prayer. The best kind of friend is a praying friend, and in your prayers you help not only others, but yourself. Anger is a force, and sometimes you cannot 'tame it'; you need to 'do something with it'. And the best thing to 'do with it' is to give it to God in prayer.

So Paul is hinting that to love genuinely is to love as Jesus loved. And our paragraph doesn't just say "Love others more," it describes very specific behaviours for loving others.

Did you know that good distance runners don't just play general messages in their minds like "Relax!" or "Stay loose!" while running? Instead, good runners play very specific messages over and over in their minds, like "Let lower lip sag!" or "Feel how loose my fingers are right now!"

It is the same with Paul's ideas for genuine Christ-like love in Romans 12:9-21. He is giving us very specific ideas for authentic love. For example, he says, "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep" (12:15), or "If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all" (12:18). Another very specific idea for love is found in the quotation from Proverbs 25:21-22 to feed and give something to drink to hungry and thirsty enemies. Of course, this does not endorse playing along with abusive strategies that arise in some dysfunctional relationships. It means to think about and to help meet others' genuine needs, including the needs of people who do not like us. 'Love' is not about how much you say 'I love' you', but how much you prove that it's true.

Genuine love is the deepest theme in this section of Romans. At a more surface level, there is a theme of good and evil that operates throughout this text. Notice how "hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good" follows immediately after the

opening title of "Let love be genuine." Then the 'good and evil' theme is explicitly mentioned at the end of the text: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:21, cf. Amos 5:15).

What is 'genuine love'? Genuine love is not just 'being nice' to people. Genuine love involves suffering, and pain, and sacrifice. Someone once said, "Some people look for beautiful places, others make a place beautiful". The Apostle Paul said we are to 'abhor evil' (Romans 12:9) and we are to "not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:21). At a 'simple level' this *might* sound like a 'moral message'; but there is another dimension to this as well.

In Romans 1:18-32, Paul describes those caught in a downward spiral of unfit worship and given over to debased minds. The result is a pattern of anti-social behaviours that bring disorder to community (verses 29-32) – quite the opposite of true love.

In Romans 12 Paul asks his audience to exhibit an *attitude* fitting for those with transformed minds, reversing anti-social patterns (see Romans 12:1-2: "Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, *in view of God's mercy*, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be *transformed* by the renewing of your mind").

How are we 'renewed'? How are we 'transformed'? We are 'renewed' and 'transformed' by the mercies of God through blood of Jesus! Romans 5:8 notes: "God shows His love for us in that while we were sinners, Christ died for us."

Someone has once said, 'Love is the circulation of the blood in the body of Christ'. (*Repeat*). This 'love' is not what 'we do', but what Jesus *has done* for us! And this is the incredible (indeed 'absurd') 'message' of 'the church: God has given His love *for all people* in the world – no matter who they are, or what they have done. This, by no means, 'excuses' evil and sinful behaviour and thoughts. But 'genuine love' is not what 'we do' for 'others' (not that we don't 'do this'); but 'genuine love is what God has done for us in Christ Jesus.

On this earth our 'human love' is not perfect. We all 'fail'. And it's not always possible to resolve every issue or restore every relationship. But in Christ Jesus there is an ever deeper 'connection': 'Love is the circulation of the blood in the body of Christ'.

Look around you... how are you to love all these people? Is love simply 'thinking nice thoughts'? No, love is much more than this. Love is looking at others with the eyes of Jesus and seeing the love He brings to bear in their lives (as well as ours as well). Genuine love *for all* is possible, for 'love' is not how we think and feel and act toward others (although this is not unimportant). Rather, love is what Jesus has done on the cross for us all. True love, ultimately, is not what we think and feel about other people. True love is God's love for us in Christ Jesus. And isn't this incredible? Amen.