

A reflection on a passage from Paul's letter to the Romans Chapter 12 vv 9-21

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My reflection this morning is on a portion of St Paul's instructions to the Christians in the first century church in Rome about how to conduct their everyday lives. Paul is talking about what love should be like within the church houses in Rome. Paul says "Let love be sincere". We might go further and say that our love must be real and genuine. I would like to think that, like God's love it must be abundant and reach out from us.

We are loved by God and there is nothing we can do about it. We can work our whole life doing great things, but none of those things will earn us that love. We can be the most spiritual person in the world, connected with nature and other people, with niceness and wisdom oozing from our pores and still we will not have earned that love. We are loved by God, because God chooses to love us. Just like when a loving parent cradles a child, so too God holds us and forgives us, despite our annoying habits and tantrums, and all through the forgiveness of Jesus the Christ.

The point that Paul makes in his letter to the Romans is that, as one body of believers, the grace of Jesus Christ fills our entire being so surely we will allow some of it to spill out!

I have to admit, love isn't an easy thing to let spill all over. God's love certainly spilled everywhere; "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son." We have been taught from childhood to pour carefully rather than to spill. When you pour, you have control over where it's going. When you pour love, you are certain that it goes in the intended direction and not behind you where it might just land on your worst enemy - now there's a thought!

When you "pour" your love, you are seen as nice. The correct people will rejoice in and appreciate your niceness. However, niceness never travels beyond a small group of people. Niceness does not spill love on the whole world as God's grace did. We don't want just to be called "nice." But to be seen as being graced, because niceness doesn't transform lives; but grace does.

We have been taught to pour, but Jesus Christ appreciates the spilling action of grace. Have you ever witnessed a child's effusive generosity when spreading love like water spray? Jesus would have no problem with the child who takes the cup of love and splatters a nice streak of love all across the room, marking the dog, soaking grandma, splashing the wallpaper, and finding its way through the door, onto the annoying neighbour who cut down your tree because it was blocking the sun. So says Paul, love generously, from the centre of who you are, don't fake it. Then he says, practice playing second fiddle. What does this mean?

Well things will not always be logical in a love spilled world. The wrong people seem honoured, and many that should be, go unnoticed. You don't get any awards for your great wisdom or your peaceful nature in a world of spilled love. Instead, people's lives are changed by God (people you would never expect to turn their lives around have their lives turned around), and you get no recognition. This kind of world makes little sense; it certainly doesn't come naturally; but it's the way of God.

So how do we do this? We must persevere, says Paul. Paul reminds us of specific things that will make certain we are sharing love and not just being nice. I want to reflect on just two of Paul's many instructions and what it means to us here today, the first one:

Help the poor... and talk to the stranger and the refugee; welcome them with everything that is yours.

This was summed up for me in a book I read recently called "The boy with two hearts". You may have heard of it, as it was a book of the week on BBC Radio 4. It is a story of a refugee family from Afghanistan. When the Taliban gave an order for the execution of Hamed Amiri's mother, the family were forced to leave everything they own and all that they knew and to flee across Russia and Europe. For over a year they endure hardship, robberies and a harrowing journey in a container lorry to reach the UK. Hamed writes of the need to get medical help for his brother Hussein who has a heart condition.

The book is a testament to the compassion they receive from those people they encounter when they finally reach the UK as refugees. It's not only a tale of a family in crisis but about the love and hope that makes them stronger. As the family settle in the UK with the help of the resettlement agencies they are amazed at the generosity they receive. Hamed's Brother Hussein has heart surgery and is cared for by the NHS. His gratitude overflows into wanting to help others. Hamish has a heart of love.

Hamed writes "Love is a strange thing, especially when it's felt between total strangers..." "I can see now that love crosses borders. It crosses religion and families, and can occur between people who'll never see each other again. It brings hope, even in the darkest moments you can face." "Love is also contagious, jumping from one person to the next and never dying out."

The second instruction from Paul is:

We are to bless those who hate you. To bless means to speak well of, not to curse. In fact, pray for them that they may turn from their ways. Do not say bad things about them, but instead encourage the goodness that they do have.

When it comes to love, there is no difference between your friends and your enemies: feed them, give them drink, and provide them with shelter. When we see them as God sees them we cannot do any other.

In Richard Rohr's book entitled "The Universal Christ" he says "The Divine presence seeks connection and communion, not separation and division, that God loves things by uniting with them, not by excluding them. When we see as God sees, what a difference it makes in the way we walk through the world, in how we encounter every person we see in the course of our day".

So then says Paul, spill your love even on enemies and hot refiner's coals will shower on them, the evil will burn away, and what will remain in them is God's grace. We are Jesus disciples here in this place.

Practice spilling grace. Hopefully, when someone visits this church community, they will not only say, "They were really nice", but they will say, "When I went there, I found what it means to be loved by God."