

"Truth Marks"
Delivered Sunday, August 28, 2011
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Romans 12:9-21

In youth group we do this thing at the beginning of each year. We take a big piece of poster board, and we talk about the things we expect of each other throughout the year. It is meant for two things: first a guide to behavior. Things show up on the list such as don't talk while others are talking, show respect to other people, don't laugh at others' pain, keep our hands to ourselves, and try to include everyone in the conversation and activities. The second thing the covenant is meant for is a reminder that we should act a certain way, not just for the other people in our group but also for God. You see, our covenant, whether or not we recognize it is an act of worship.

Here in the second half of the twelfth chapter of Romans, we have from Paul his own version of covenant. In fact, if one verb is translated a different way, we have what looks exactly like our youth covenants, even in list form. Christopher Hutson reminds us that verse 9 contains no verbs, and so the verb *to be* is understood and in the NRSV is translated in the imperative, or as a command, and reads: Let love be genuine or un-hypocritical. But just as easily, the understood verb *to be* can be read as an indicative, which is the basic form of a verb and would read simply: Love is genuine/unhypocritical. In the first rendering, we hear a command from Paul to let the love we show be a certain kind of love with certain characteristics that we must employ so that love fulfills its role in our society.

However, hear this second rendering where the verb is indicative, and it reads just like a covenant from our youth group:

Love is abhorring the evil; clinging to the good.
Being affectionate to one another in brotherly love,
Outdoing one another in honor,
not lagging in diligence,
being afire in the Spirit,
serving the Lord, rejoicing in hope,
persevering in affliction,
being devoted to prayer,
contributing to the needs of the saints,
pursuing hospitality.

It has all of the same characteristics that our youth group covenants have: hating evil and supporting good, being kind in a state of brotherly love to each other, serving the Lord, and persevering in doing good even when its hard, helping your neighbor.

I think Paul is not so much commanding us to let love be a certain thing. Rather I think he is reminding us what love is and that, rather than employing actions to make love live up to our hope for what it can be, it is our job to make ourselves be vessels of something so pure as the love God has for us so that we might be able to show others what it is we aspire to do and to be. Namely creatures of and for love, genuine and unhypocritical, the love of God.

Okay – what we seem to have here is a covenant of sorts that Paul is laying out before us. A list of things that love is and that we should strive to participate in. The list also acts as a reminder that our daily actions are a way in which we worship God.

Here it is time to realize that the ways in which Paul describes genuine love are not merely abstract notions or theories on what love means or what love can be. They are descriptors of what Christians should be doing to show that they believe in and have received the love of God. They can do nothing else but respond by exploding that love outward to the world despite all of their human misgivings. We are those Christians.

In the beginning of chapter 12, Paul gives us the lens through which we need to read the rest of the chapter. “I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God which is your reasonable worship.”

Then in verses 9-21 he offers us concrete applications – our covenant – for how to participate in right worship. Our verses for today reflect the thinking from the first verse of chapter 12 and give us reasonable and bodily ways in which we should worship God everyday. Our worship is not merely about being in church on Sunday with hymns and baptism and scripture. Our worship – according to Paul – must be a daily act of giving ourselves to the world.

But this is where things get tricky for the average Christian. When we hear that we have to give ourselves to the world – we inevitably conjure up images of Jesus trudging through Israel in sandals performing miracles. Or we think of Mother Teresa giving up her life to help the poor and the sick in Calcutta or even someone like Gandhi who fasted for weeks or Martin Luther King Jr. who led our civil rights movement. And we think to ourselves, that is just too much commitment. Not only could I never picture myself giving up a Sunday nap or time with my friends at football games, but I’m not sure I could accomplish what they did anyway, so what’s the use. Our brains give us this vastly inflated image of what we would have to do to give of ourselves.

And into that overwhelming flood of the impossible steps Paul and his covenant. Reminding us that it isn’t always about grandiose acts of forgiveness and rebellion. It isn’t always about prophetic speeches and going hungry. It isn’t always about moving to an impoverished section of the world and leaving friends and family behind. Sometimes – and we might argue most of the time – it is about daily acts of worship. Daily reminders handed out to others that there is something more to be had. Small acts of Christian hospitality that help those who receive to know that they are cared for, and the hope that in that small moment of being cared for, they might share a taste of the kind of love that God offers to us all.

Miss Lena Cooper was the oldest lady I ever knew back when I was in middle school. She was warm and loving and kind and made the best pound cake I ever ate. To this day, I will tell you that Miss Lena’s pound cake is the best ever, and you can’t pay me to think differently. I remember her for the way in which she hugged us kids when we came to the church, how she would always have a few dollars to give us when we were raising money for our mission trip, and how her car was the only one we tried extra hard not to hit with the football. I can’t tell you the number of times we held our breath as the football or the Frisbee came oh so close and would just miss, and we would sigh in relief that we didn’t hurt Miss Lena’s car. But thinking back now, I know that she wouldn’t have minded.

What is interesting about Miss Lena though is not our uncanny desire not to hurt her car or even her impressive baking skills. It was the fact that every year they asked her to be a member of Session and every year she said no. She was not interested in helping to govern the church or to make financial decisions. She said she didn’t know the first thing about how to run a church. And yet, every Thursday morning, Miss Lena was in the sanctuary collecting all 200 golf pencils from every pew. She would walk up and down the aisles collecting pencils; she would take them down the hall to her Sunday School class and sharpen every one. Every Sunday, my buddies and I would predict the final football scores for that afternoon, and every Sunday we had freshly sharpened pencils to do it with. Miss Lena didn’t need to start a revolution or move to Calcutta and feed the homeless to show me and the rest of my friends what it meant to give of ourselves for others.

That hospitality that Miss Lena showed to the rest of the church without them even realizing it is the kind of thing that Paul is talking about when he implores us to present our bodies as a living sacrifice. Its not always about dying for our friends, neighbors and enemies, it’s more often about living for them. It’s about living our lives in a way that the youth of the church understand better how they should be living. Its about setting an example day in and day out of worshipping the God who has forgiven us all of our sins even as we continue to sin. Worship is not just singing and scripture and being in church, it’s about living a life that shows gratitude to the God who made you by being gracious to others. The passing of the peace is not an empty gesture – it is an act of forgiveness and reconciliation that despite our differences, I greet you with the peace of Christ. It is a very small and very important act of worship.

The marks of a true Christian are not millions of dollars donated or eloquently prayed prayers. The marks of a true Christian are being a part of this covenant Paul has laid out before us:

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Outdoing one another in honor,
not lagging in diligence,
being afire in the Spirit,
serving the Lord, rejoicing in hope,
persevering in affliction,
being devoted to prayer,
contributing to the needs of the saints,
pursuing hospitality.

We must understand that worship is an everyday activity – that Christian hospitality is the most important way that we can show God's love to others. So stop giving up on being a living sacrifice because you can't hope to be as awesome as Mother Teresa. Understand the true nature of Paul's covenant and start sharpening pencils.