

**“Finding a Way to Embrace the Jesus Ethic of Love”**

**Romans 12:9-21**

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I have told some of you about my experience following the tragic events of September 11, 2001. While most pastors would not pass up an opportunity to address a packed sanctuary — something all churches experienced the first Sunday after 9-11 — I invited my good friend and congregant and chair of the religion department at the time at Wake Forest University, Charles Kimball, to preach. I gave up the pulpit because I thought the wisest thing I could do was to allow the church I served to hear from one of our nation’s leading experts on the Middle East, Islam and the intersection of religious, cultural and political life.

Charles, who has now retired in our area with his wife Nancy, did not disappoint. He preached out of today’s reading from Romans 12 a message about getting past categories of *us* and *them*, not responding to evil with evil, leaving vengeance to God and extending kindness even to the one we call *enemy*. He also acknowledged the place of anger and distinguished between the vast majority of peaceful Muslims and terrorists who distort a noble faith, but he mostly pointed to the Jesus ethic of love. It was a much-needed message. Many people appreciated it deeply, even if they struggled with it, but some did not appreciate it.

It is a difficult message to hear when we are genuinely hurt and angry. “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord,” in a verse from Deuteronomy (32:35) the Apostle Paul quotes in writing to the church at Rome, and we are willing to acknowledge this reality, but just in case the Lord tarries, we’d like get some of our own vengeance. When Dana told me about the woman in the gas station east of Nashville who went into a tirade about masks because Dana was wearing one, and her husband who walked up to Dana and exhaled into her face, I was not thinking about love and mutual affection, overcoming evil with good. I was wondering where I might find this couple and how I might introduce them to our two German Shepherds we had with us in the car!

Extending love to those who seek to harm us is not easy — to say the least — it is not natural. We'd be fine talking about the first part of our passage today, all these lovely words about loving with mutual affection, outdoing one another in showing honor, being ardent in spirit, persevering in prayer, extending hospitality. Maybe if we do all of these good and noble things, we won't have any enemies, and thus we won't have to love them. This paragraph provides a nice summary of positive action, very much like a meme about social media.

You may have seen it. THINK is the acronym, standing for “true, helpful, inspiring, necessary and kind.” Before we post anything on social media, we should ask whether what we are posting is true, helpful, inspiring, necessary and kind. If it is not, we shouldn't post it. That would certainly cut down considerably on the number of posts I have seen. The Apostle Paul's first words to the church at Rome about the Jesus ethic of love are like this. We should pursue things that are true, helpful, inspiring, necessary and kind. We're fine with this.

But sometimes people post things that do not meet these criteria. Sometimes we end up at odds with people no matter how much we try to allow our love to be genuine. Sometimes people do things to make us not just angry but downright cussing mad (even if we use southern euphemisms)! What do we do then? That is the matter Paul addresses with the latter half of our passage and what he says echoes many teachings of Jesus about turning the other cheek and loving the enemy. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, he says, never avenge yourselves; if your enemies are hungry, feed them.

We know it is our calling, but we just don't like it. So, we don't often do it when someone really makes us angry. How do we embrace this dimension of the Jesus ethic of love?

Perhaps we might begin by acknowledging the anger we feel at times and creating space to express it in a healthy way. Sometimes we feel pressured to extend forgiveness and pursue reconciliation immediately when we are hurt without allowing ample time to sort through our emotions. When we do, one of two things will happen. Either we will refuse this calling entirely or we will hurry into it because

we feel compelled. But even when we choose the latter, the forgiveness and reconciliation we share will be superficial, and feelings of anger will simply fester deep inside. Noble theological and ethical principles do not magically displace emotions. It is healthier to be honest about our feelings and express them, and doing so is a prelude to authentic love.

A recent issue of *The Christian Century* includes an insightful article entitled “Lament, Not Forgiveness” written by Waltrina N. Middleton (*The Christian Century*, July 15, 2020, pp. 26-29). Her cousin, Depayne V. Middleton, whom she called Dep, was one of the nine members of the Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina killed by self-proclaimed white supremacist Dylan Roof on June 17, 2015. Lament, not forgiveness, is where she is.

Her cousin — a minister, devoted mother, and brilliant vocalist — was part of a church that practiced Christian hospitality. They welcomed in the stranger to worship, prayer and study that night. Dep shared a Bible with him. But she did not get to go home to her four daughters that night. She did not have another meal with them, while Roof was taken to a Burger King before he went to jail.

We were at Kiawah Island that night, we ate in Charleston the next evening, there was an anxious and sad mood permeating everything, but the story of the next week was all about forgiveness, the amazing capacity of some family members of the deceased to speak words of forgiveness. Dep’s family had a different reaction. It’s not that the calling to forgiveness was alien to them. They just weren’t ready yet.

“We can be committed to love and radical hospitality,” writes Waltrina Middleton, “to welcoming the stranger into our midst, to extending a seat to join us at the table — while also retaining our right to be angry and to righteously resist the violence against our humanity. To insist on a narrative of forgiveness is dehumanizing and violent. As Christians, we celebrate the donning of sackcloth and ashes as a priestly act of lamentation and mourning. Why deny families, in a watershed moment of grief, this right to lament?”

It is a profound insight, painfully obvious, but one we often miss. It is a much-needed word for our national life right now... Anger is a part of our response to tragic events like mass shootings and wrongful

police shootings and terrorist acts. It is okay even for people of faith not just to feel anger but to search for some way to express it.

Following 9-11 in my previous setting, we used all of Psalm 137. It is the psalm that begins with those beautiful and haunting words of lament sung by people living in exile, “By the rivers of Babylon — there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps... How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” But the psalm ends with these imprecatory words. “O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!”

It seems obvious why we don’t read the whole psalm very often, but there are times when we need to read it because it creates space for us to express our anger at wrongdoing. Anger is not where we need to end, and even in our anger, we need to avoid any effort to seek revenge, to act on our impulses. But we feel what we feel and we not only need to express our feelings, doing so helps us to find a way to forgiveness.

At some point though, we are called to move beyond anger. There is no magical time frame, and each of us must discern this for ourselves, but at some point, we need to move toward forgiveness and healing. Holding on to anger is self-destructive and a barrier to community, not to mention in sharp contrast to the clear teachings of our faith.

In an article included in the August 27, 2020, issue of *The Wall Street Journal*, Mike Kerrigan describes our need eloquently. He cites St. Augustine’s prayer of adolescence, “Lord, make me chaste, but not yet,” and notes how odd it seems. How could an otherworldly saint have uttered such a worldly prayer? But he recognizes his own desire to postpone action on important matters like forgiveness. We pray each week to be forgiven as we forgive, but hold on to our demand for justice.

He says for him this is part ethnic pride. He grew up hearing shibboleths of relatives with Irish Alzheimer’s, where they forgot everything except their grudges. But he has come to realize that what he needs is not firm justice but tender mercy. There is a time to let go of the anger and forgive. But how do we get there?

In part, by realizing that we are talking about an act of the will, not an emotion. Perhaps this is why Paul encourages us to feed our enemies if they are hungry, give them something to drink if they are thirsty. These are actions, not feelings. And if ever our feelings are going to change, it will be while we are acting in another person's best interest.

I think of a story about Corrie Ten Boom. After World War II, she was on a speaking tour talking about God's amazing gift of forgiveness. After one speech, a man approached her whom she recognized as one of the meanest guards at Ravensbrook, the Nazi prison camp where she had been and where so many died, including some of her loved ones. He said he had become a Christian after the war and experienced God's forgiveness, but he wanted to know if she could forgive him.

At first, she felt nothing but then remembered that forgiveness is an act of the will, not an emotion. So, she reached out her hand to touch him, and as she did, she felt a sudden warmth beginning in her arm and then moving through her entire body. She embraced the man and spoke words of forgiveness. Then, she recalled the words of Romans 5:3–5. "We also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."

The way we move past our anger is by acting in a way that benefits the person we view as an enemy — a family member who has created conflict, a stranger who has harmed us, a political adversary in this contentious time. In the process of extending kindness, something changes within us. I think of the police officers who have kneeled with protesters and the protesters who made a circle around an isolated officer in Louisville to protect him. When we act in the best interest of our would-be enemies, we cannot help but recognize their humanity.

But the story about Corrie Ten Boom reminds us of something else. She recalled the passage from Romans that says God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. The warmth that stirred in her body and empowered her act of forgiveness was not merely human. It was of God. She could not do it alone. Nor can we. But with God's help, all things are possible.

I think of the words of Father Zossima in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* which underscore just how difficult the Jesus ethic of love can be and how we embrace it (p. 58).

Never be frightened at your own faint-heartedness in attaining love. Don't be too frightened overmuch even at your own evil actions. I'm sorry I can say nothing more consoling to you, for love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared with love in dreams. Love in dreams is greedy for immediate action, rapidly performed and in the sight of all. Men will even give their lives, if only the ordeal does not last too long but is soon over, with all looking on and applauding as though on stage. But active love is labor and fortitude, and for some people too, perhaps, a complete science. But I predict that just when you see with horror that in spite of all your efforts, you are getting further from your goal instead of nearer to it — at that very moment I predict that you will reach it and behold clearly the miraculous power of the Lord who has been all the time loving you and mysteriously guiding you.

What is asked of us, love in action, is not easy, especially in this time. Jesus calls us to deny ourselves, take up a cross and follow him — follow the man who asked God to forgive the very people who were putting him to death while they were putting him to death. But we are not asked to do this alone. The Holy Spirit has been given to us. The miraculous power of Lord is all the time loving us and mysteriously guiding us. Thanks be to God!