

INI

Epiphany 2 / 15 January 2017

Romans 12,6-16

Greeting: To those who are called, sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ; mercy, peace, and love be multiplied to you. Amen.

We hear a portion of the Epistle lesson, which was read earlier.

Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good.

So far the text. Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy sight, O LORD, our strength and my redeemer.

Introduction. There are various ways of translating the phrase, “Let love be without hypocrisy.” The King James version has, “Let love be without dissimulation.” But we hardly use the word “dissemble” today, which, by the way, means “to cloak or disguise one’s true feelings.” Other translations speak of “Let love be sincere.”

The word *sincere* comes to us from the Latin, and its origin lies in the marketplace, where people would come and buy and sell things. In the ancient world, people bought clay jars, and the jars would be used for any number of things. But to make a clay jar meant to mix the clay, pound it out so that there would be no air bubbles, and then put it into an oven or kiln to heat it so the clay would become hard enough so that the jar could hold either hot or cold liquids.

But when a clay jar is heated, it could develop cracks; the cracks developed because not all the air bubbles had been pounded out. Now almost no one would buy a pot with cracks in it. I wouldn’t – and I’m sure you wouldn’t either. But some merchant artisans would not let

cracks deter them from trying to sell the pot. Rather than throw out the cracked pot, they would put colored wax into the cracks and the pot would look “good as new.” If you bought a cosmetically altered pot you would be in for a nasty surprise when you poured hot liquid into the pot because the wax would melt and the pot would leak all over the place. That would be a good-for-nothing, worthless pot! How could consumers tell which pots were cracked which were not?

The sure way to tell would be to hold the jar up to the sun, and then regardless of how good the colored wax was, the light would show where the cracks were, if there were any.

Some merchants then put signs on their pots or jars, and in Latin the sign read, “*sine cere*,” which was Latin for “without wax.” These were uncracked pots, no cosmetic alterations, and people could put their confidence in them that the imperfections were not covered up. And from that Latin phrase, we get our word *sincere*.

This brings us to the theme of today’s sermon, “**God’s Forgiving Love Seals The Cracks**”; and we’ll develop this theme in three points:

- 1) The Wax of God’s Love;**
- 2) Cling To The Good And Hate The Evil;** and,
- 3) Sincerity Means Action.**

1) The Wax of God’s Love. Elsewhere in the Scriptures, both in the Old Testament and the New Testament, believers are compared to clay pots. In the Old, the prophet Isaiah, spoke of God being the potter and we being the clay. In the New, the apostle Paul speaks of us having a treasure in earthen vessels, or, clay pots. All of us, are clay pots.

In our lesson for today, the apostle Paul tells us to love sincerely. That is to say, we clay pots should love without having any cracks.

We can certainly appear to each other as if we have no cracks. I

am reminded of a cartoon I saw years ago in the *New Yorker*. Two judges are putting on their robes for court, and one says to the other, “You know at home I can’t do anything right and I get no respect. My wife and children all are more than delighted to point out my faults. But you know what, I put on these robes and walk into that court room and by gum I’m it.” At home, that poor cartoon judge had a wife and children to points out his cracks, but in the court room there were no cracks — at least none that people would readily point out.

And that can be the way with us as well. In certain positions we can appear as if we have no cracks. But deep down inside, all of us know in our heart that we have cracks. For us humans it is impossible to love without cracks.

And if, by any chance, we think that we can be perfectly sincere in our love, all we have to do is hold ourselves up to the light of God’s holiness. All of a sudden, when compared with the light of perfection, we see that we are but leaky pots. God’s Law shines a light in the darkness to reveal our imperfections. Our sincerity can be put to the test and found to be wanting.

But when we look at this Scripture in the light of faith, we see that God has provided a remedy, a cosmic patch so to speak, a cosmic cosmetic alteration.

Our love cannot be anything but the love of God. It is God’s love which has been poured into us. And that love is nothing less than the love which God shows us in and through His Son, Jesus Christ.

Christ’s love is the love which He purchased for us on the Cross. This is the love of commitment, the love that goes into death for us while we were yet sinners, while we were yet enemies of God. This is the love that wins for us forgiveness and declares that we are forgiven.

Thus, when we are held up to the light of God’s holiness, God does

not see our cracks, but the forgiveness, the righteousness won for us by Christ.

God's love is indeed the forgiveness of Christ that in His eyes seals or covers our imperfections, our cracks.

2) Cling To The Good And Hate The Evil. Paul goes on to tell us that in the forgiveness of Jesus, which covers our imperfections, we are to hate evil and cling to what is good.

There are all sorts of loony tune notions at work in the world that say that some how love accepts everything, and it speaks to a basic confusion about not only what love is, but also what good and evil are.

By our own nature, we cannot know what is good and what is evil. Oh, sure, we can figure some things out. But we need only look at the news media and see that people can excuse virtually anything.

When we still lived in Edmonton, we went to an exhibition called "Anno Domini," which showed images of Christ through the ages. There we saw a picture of Robert Latimer. Latimer had killed his severely handicapped daughter; love, he said, made him do it. Love for Tracy Latimer, to relieve her of her pain. She who could not speak for herself died. But was it love? More on that later.

For those who hear of an American religious figure who fathered a child out of wedlock, the child was described as a "love child." Maybe "lust child" would have been closer to the point. Better to be like a former mayor of San Francisco who admitted to the same thing with a campaign worker. He said, "Who cares?" At least he did not try to cover up his immorality with the word "love."

In these and many other cases the problem is the idea that love justifies anything. But it doesn't.

The knowledge of good and evil was lost in the garden of Eden. That was the tree of which Adam and Eve were forbidden to eat. Why? They had no need. Without sin, they had the knowledge of God Himself, and the perfect knowledge of God can distinguish between good and evil

But the temptation was to ignore God's warning and taste and see that the fruit was good to the eye and good to the taste. And it probably was. But in that seemingly deceptive goodness, their act meant that the sweetness of the fruit hid the taste of death and sin.

Thus, today, the idea that love justifies anything masks the taste of sin and death. If the senses agree, then do it.

3) Sincerity Means Action. But sincere love, the love that is shown to us in Christ, the love that is committed to forgive, that love that hides our imperfections, calls us to action. But the action to which we are called is always judged against and normed by the Word of God.

This love then rejoices in hope, is patient in tribulation, and is steadfast in prayer.

What does this mean?

Hope is more than a wishy washy feeling that things will work out. That was the Greek idea. Well, maybe tomorrow will be better than today. We can only hope.

No, the rejoicing in hope of which Paul speaks is the hope that in Christ we have the assurance of forgiveness and the assurance that Christ has won for us the victory over sin, death, and the power of the devil. Thus, we have hope — a hope that is not centered on our experience, but anchored in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

We have hope so that we can be patient in tribulation.

Tribulation means a host of things to a host of people. But generally we can say that tribulation means troubles — whether physical or spiritual. It may mean illness. It may mean a handicap. Think of Tracy Latimer, whom I mentioned earlier

Tracy Latimer had an incurable handicap, a severe case of cerebral palsy. She suffered. But you know, from the reports she also had joy and her pain was not unremitting. She could smile. She had good days and bad days. The early Greeks and Romans had a cure for people like Tracy — Death. Exposure as an infant. But the Church throughout the ages has spoken against this kind of mis-named “mercy.” The Church, however, spoke of life. The Church spoke of the steadfast love shown us in and by Christ, a steadfast love that would bear with the burdens of tribulation in whatever form they may come. The Church spoke a word of life, not a word of death. To pretend otherwise is to twist history and to twist Christ. Love in Christ affirms life, not death. Without God’s Word, love might excuse anything; but with His Word, His word of strength, we bear with the humble, the handicapped through their tribulation.

Tribulation may mean marriage problems. What is the solution? Love children? Love that excuses anything? Hardly! Love is patient, patient even in tribulation. Here then we are to look to God’s word for strength, to take us through the tribulation of spirit and as Christ was victorious so we shall be as well. Love does not excuse anything.

Abraham Lincoln had the right idea. He was married to Mary Todd, a short and seemingly mean-spirited woman. At the end of her life she sank into madness. One time Lincoln was asked why he put up with her. He merely smiled and said it was the same with a horse, regardless, you just hug them and love them more. Just as Christ has hugged us and loved us more than we can know through His Cross.

And we are to continue to steadfast in prayer. This is close to the idea of praying constantly. Praying that we may always be rooted in the

Word of God, that His Spirit may always enlighten us, so that we may always follow in the footsteps of He Who walked Calvary's road for us. So that we may be given the grace and the strength to always believe on and act on the hope that is secure and laid up for us in the heavens; that we may always be patient in tribulation, that we may not be deceived by the world, our flesh, and the devil.

Conclusion. All around us the world urges us to love and accept.

But God urges upon us a different love. It is a love that is sincere. It binds our imperfections up with the word of forgiveness. It enlightens us to know what is good and evil. It opens up the Word of God to us to distinguish between the ways of the world and the ways of God. It bids us to be able to be sincere, to be committed to life, to be committed to the love of God, in which our hope is rooted, a hope which persists in times of tribulation and is oriented by prayer which is rooted in God's word.

Love works itself out in action. First of God's love towards us, but then our love towards others. Are we perfect? No? Are we forgiven? Yes. Then we have no fear of acting out our sincere, albeit imperfect, love to others. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. **Amen.**

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