

*Love's Labor Rom. 12:9–21 Pent 13A 9-3-17*

In the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, Tevye, the poor patriarch of a Jewish family in rural Russia asks his wife Golde, “Do you love me?” She answers, “Do I love you? For twenty-five years I’ve washed your clothes Cooked your meals, cleaned your house. Given you children, milked the cow After twenty-five years, why talk about love right now?” When he repeats the question, she thinks to herself, “Do I love him? For twenty-five years I’ve lived with him, Fought him, starved with him. Twenty-five years my bed is his. If that’s not love, what is?” Tevye asks, “Then you love me?” She answers, “I suppose I do”.

We would not call this a romantic marriage or even happy. Yet there are few better examples of genuine love. Golde lived the life of love that labors. Their marriage was arranged by a matchmaker, and their parents told them they would learn to love each other. That they did.

People who love genuinely, in marriage or with brotherly affection are like humble people who don’t know their humble. They don’t think themselves. Genuine love does not count the cost, see who’s looking, or even knows its name.

Let’s see what else Paul says about love. In Galatians, it is a fruit of the Spirit, not up to our ability, but God given.

Labor Day will mean a day off from work for many, has it has for the last 123 years to honor laborers and highlight needed reforms in labor law. But love’s labor doesn’t take a day or long week-end off. Paul also wrote in Galatians not to grow weary of doing good. Do not fail to help someone when you have the opportunity. In Romans 13 he says, “Owe no one anything, except to love each other”. The obligation of love is never paid off. He also wrote, “Love never ends.

In today’s lesson, we learn that genuine love hates evil and clings to what is good. It does not enable evil out of misguided compassion or fairness. When evil will hurt the evil-doer, true love will be tough enough to warn the evil doer.

Love for our neighbor comes naturally for those who experience God’s love in Christ. Loving each other is not just paying God back, or saying “thank you” to Him. It is natural for those who believe and receive the new life Jesus gave when He gave His life to redeem us from sin and selfishness.

The Spirit of God, our source of genuine love, sets us free from the prejudices that divide us into groups and keep us from knowing and loving individuals. He move us to love others as brothers and sisters, with purity and respect. We will be more hopeful, patient, prayerful, generous, hospitable, and zealous to do good. This was on bold display on the Texas coast all week, and by God’s grace, will continue to be.

The greatest accomplishment of Spirit born love is that we are free to love our enemies. We love them as Christ loved us. Though we were his born sinners, He bore our sins and loved us into friendship with him.

Now with hearts transformed by His great mercy, we love our enemies into friendship with us. We don’t answer their evil, injury, anger or insults with more of the same. Rather we respond with kindness.

For is it our goal? To defeat or conquer others? Are we at war with people, though Christ made peace with us? God said that he will take care of the injustice we suffer, either directly, or through ordained governments, which Paul addresses in the next chapter. If you want to kill your neighbor, kill him with kindness instead. Paul says it works.

Our goal is to be like Christ, to carry our cross, empty ourselves of our selfish ambition and agendas. We take aim at others, not to do harm, but to bring Christ into their lives. When we take time to love them, they realize they need the love that Jesus gave us. How tragic to let our personal animosity become a deterrent to their salvation!

Our Christian vocation is simple. Love your neighbor as yourself. That, with loving God above all thing and hating evil, is the only commandment He gave us.

So today, in view of the disaster that has visited our fellow Texans, genuine love is that which labors. We see it in the responses of so many, neighbor helping neighbor, loving people, not hating groups.

From the cross, Jesus did see all people as members of one group: sinners in need of saving. We too can see people in that way: souls hurting from the slavery and wounds of a sinful world, in whatever form that takes. As we are in need of mercy, so we give mercy to our neighbor who has the same need. To quote Goldie, if that’s not love, what is? May God’s Spirit empower us to labor in love. Amen.