**7th Sunday after Epiphany – Year A – February 23, 2014 Faith Lutheran, Radcliff, KY**

**Based on Romans 12:9-21 written by Pastor Paul Horn**

**Sincere Love Moves Us**

**I. As ones set on fire to serve the Lord (vs9-13)**

**II. As ones who do not avenge but wait for the Lord (vs14-21)**

 Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. 10 Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. 11 Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. 12 Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. 13 Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. 14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. 16 Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. 17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. 18 If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. 19 Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. 20 On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Last week in Raleigh, North Carolina, a jury found 41-year old actress Amanda Hayes guilty as an accomplice of the gruesome murder of the mother of her husband’s children. After the verdict was read, Amanda stood up in the court room and said, “I’m truly, truly sorry, with every ounce of my soul.” The victim’s father isn’t buying that apology, and in an interview he replied, “She’s a manipulator. She’s a liar.”

How can you tell if someone is being sincere? This morning each of you confessed your sins and then said, “I am truly sorry for my sins.” How do I know you were sincere? After the Prayer of the Day you all replied, “Amen!” meaning, “Yes, let this be so!” How do I know you were sincere? Is it my job to figure that out? Can I ever truly know if you are sincere in the things that you say?

This morning the Holy Spirit wants to talk to you about sincere love, using the words he gave to Apostle Paul. You will learn that **Sincere Love Moves Us**, love moves us **as ones who are set on fire to serve the Lord**, and secondly sincere love moves us **as ones who do not avenge but wait for the Lord**.

First of all, what is sincere love? The Greek word the Apostle Paul uses for love in 12:9 is agape. That word agape describes selfless love, servant-minded love, love that thinks about others first and does not seek anything in return. Agape loves unconditionally, it forgives unconditionally. It’s the same word the Apostle John used in his gospel, **“God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son.”** (3:16) Agape love doesn’t just say, “I love you,” it shows that love through action.

Now you understand what Paul means when he says, “**Love must be sincere**.” Love is genuine. It doesn’t just say, “I love you,” it puts that love into action, just as God did. Paul said in vs11, “**Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord**.” Paul is saying, “Sincere love motivates you as someone who is on fire to serve the Lord.” Sincere love burns, it glows, it wants to serve the Lord… and as you put more fuel on that fire - that fuel is the mercy of God, the message of forgiveness and hope in Christ - the brighter that desire is to serve the Lord

Are you on fire to serve your Savior? Of course you are! You have received the love of God through faith in Christ Jesus! Now, how do you put that spiritual fervor into practice? Paul says, “**Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves.”** Serve the Lord by serving your family, your church family, your brothers and sisters in Christ. Are you always on fire to serve each other? Do you find that sometimes people pour water on your fire?

So here you are… part of the ministry at Faith Lutheran Church, using your time, talents and offerings to serve the Lord. And another member offers some constructive criticism about the way you’re doing whatever it is you’re doing. There’s two ways to react to that individual. One is to say, “Thanks. Maybe there is some truth to what you’re saying. Maybe I need to reevaluate.” Or… you can let their words eat at you and what you end up doing is pouring water on your fire to serve. In the end, it’s not their fault, is it? It’s yours because of the way you reacted to them.

Another way I think that Christians snuff out their fire is with resentfulness. Here you are serving your Lord with your time, talents and offerings. And you look around and you can’t help but notice that others aren’t… at least, it appears that way, and then you fall into, “Why don’t more people volunteer? Why is it always the same folks? What don’t I get recognized for what I do around here? If I weren’t here, this wouldn’t get done!” Then you have forgotten that sincere love serves the Lord, not you and your pride, your ego.

Have you let that fire dwindle down to just the glowing embers? This is what happens when you and I become lazy with God’s love for us, lazy with our daily time in God’s Word, lazy in our weekly habit of worship, Bible study with those brothers and sisters. Then we have a tendency to forget that God loves us, and we become lazy with the way we serve others. Why would God say that he loves you, or that he loves me, and put his love into action for us, when it is so clear that we have not loved with a sincere love?

On November 7th, 1907, a railroad boxcar containing dynamite caught fire in the village of Nacozari in Sonora, Mexico. The whole town of Nacozari should have been blown into the air like dandelion seeds scattered by a single, careless puff. It wasn't, however, thanks to the railroad engineer, Jesús García. When he noticed that the boxcar had caught fire, he quickly drove the railroad car away from the town where it exploded harmlessly--harmlessly for the people of the village, but not for Jesús. Jesús himself died in the blast.

The train engineer was hailed a hero because he saved a town of hard working people, of boys and girls, and of grandpas and grandmas. But what if he had driven a burning boxcar of TNT away from the mansion of a Mexican drug lord? Would the newspaper headlines have read, "Jesús García Demonstrates Love By Dying For Drug Lords!"? More likely they would call him a fool. Why not let the boxcar explode and take the drug lord and all his cronies out with him?

Earlier in his letter to the Romans, Paul wrote, **“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us”** (5:8). **While we were still sinners** - in spite of the fact that God knew you and I would complain about other human beings, resent them, be prideful, selfish human beings, even though he knew you and I would become lazy with his Word - **while we were still sinners**, he loved us anyway, with agape love, love that put itself into action for your benefit. That love saw its fullness in this, **“Christ died for us.”**

There is another Jesús who gave his life in a daring rescue. On Good Friday, Jesus of Nazareth hitched the world's sins to himself, your sins, and pulled them up on the cross where God's fury exploded with a deafening sound that can still be heard 2,000 years later. Why did Jesus do it? Step close, listen and you’ll hear, **“In this way God so loved the world – he gave his one and only Son.”** Why did God do it? Because of his amazing love for you.

This is sincere love in action. This is the love you have received from God through faith in Jesus Christ. Sincere love motivates you and me to be people who are on fire to serve the Lord. Sincere love shows brotherly and sisterly love to those within the family of believers. Sincere love honors others above yourself. Sincere love serves others in view of God’s mercy, serving not themselves but the Lord. My dear sisters and brothers in Christ, keep that love burning, especially in the next few months as you pray together, worship, and study and work together and you wait for your new pastor. Practice sincere love with each other.

Not only does sincere love extend to the family of God, but Paul moves on to another group of people: your enemies.

**II. As ones who do not avenge but wait for the Lord (vs14-21)**

In my opinion, these are some of the hardest words of Scripture, **“Love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you**.” (Matthew 5:44) Paul echoes Jesus’ words in our lesson, **“Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath. If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”**

But Jesus, that’s not how the world works. Evil men fly airplanes into our buildings, we’re going to hunt down the evil men who sent them and kill them. To the sales person who is rude to me at the store, I will be rude right back. To those who criticize me, I’ll defend myself and throw that criticism right back at them. To the neighbor whose loose dog always leaves presents in my yard, and the individual who keyed my car in the parking lot, I will harbor anger and hatred toward you.

And I’m going to be especially violent with my tongue to those who put me down and attack my faith and my beliefs. To those who make a mockery of my God and his moral standard for sex and marriage, who do not defend the lives of the unborn, to those who deny God’s almighty hand in the creation of this world, to those who deny the only one way to salvation through Christ Jesus… it is my right to fire right back at them with no love in my tone of voice. And to all of the Stephen Hawking’s and Bill Nye’s, Madalyn Murray O’Hair’s and Salman Rushdie’s of the world, who say there is no God, don’t we wish they would just die and burn in hell because that’s what they deserve for rejecting God. I don’t know about you, but I’m all for people getting what they have coming. I’m all for quick and divine justice… as long as it’s on other people.

But then I hear the words of my loving Savior as he calmly says, **“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”** He means that I will show the same love he showed to the world, unconditional love. When I try to justify my anger, my retaliation, then I am disobeying a direct order from my God, I am not practicing sincere love for all people, and then I need to think about what divine retribution I deserve, what divine justice is waiting for me?

And then God lovingly turns me back to the pages of Scripture, yet again, and shows me what sincere love looks like, “**Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you**,” and he puts that love into action, **“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”** There is no room for justified anger, no room for excuses, “But they did this to me!” In our Savior’s heart there is only room for love and forgiveness, even at his execution. He was there to die for those same men who executed him, he died for those men who rejected him, he died for the Stephen Hawking’s and Salman Rushdie’s and the terrorists who want to bomb our country and the classmate at school who denies the existence of God and the coworker who refuses to believe that Christ is the only way to salvation, he died for them, because he wants them to be saved.

And he died for you, because he wants you to be saved, and his heart is glad because by the power of the Holy Spirit you do believe, by faith you have received the gift of God’s love and forgiveness.

In the end if those who persecute us reject his love, he will take care of divine retribution. That’s not my job to bring vengeance down on them, that’s God’s domain. He will bring judgment on them if they continue to reject his love for them. My domain is love, agape love, sincere, genuine love - love that sees these enemies of mine as souls for whom Jesus died. God wants those people to be saved, even if we don’t think they deserve it. God wants nothing more than that they repent and believe. So… that’s what I want, too. And I will love them with a sincere love. I will overcome evil with good. I will be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it possible, as far as it depends on me, I will live at peace with everyone.”

Paul says, **“in doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.”** He knew from experience how that felt… There was a man by the name of Stephen, one of the leaders of the church in Jerusalem, who lived just after Jesus had ascended into heaven, who was very gifted at preaching and teaching about Jesus. The religious leaders of the Jews, who still denied that Jesus was the Savior, had had enough of him. One day they trumped up false charges against him, dragged him into court, and accused him of blasphemy against God. After listening to his testimony, they were so angry, that they shouted at the top of their lungs, dragged him out of the city and began to throw large rocks at his body, to finally silence him. While his body was being broken and bleeding, not a word was spoken against them. These were the last words uttered from his lips, **“Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”** (Acts 7:60)

The Scriptures record that a young man by the name of Saul was there at Stephen’s murder, giving approval of what was going on. You know him better as the Apostle Paul who penned this letter to the Romans and who was on fire to talk so passionately about a God who loves, who is patient, and who forgives. Yes, God’s love works, even on the worst of your enemies.

My dear sisters and brothers in Christ, I pray that your love will be sincere, as ones who are on fire to serve the Lord, and that your sincere love will not seek vengeance, but wait for God’s wrath. Let God’s sincere love motivate you, so that you will, in turn, love all people with sincere love. Amen.