



“LOVE IN PUBLIC”

SCRIPTURE: ROMANS 12:9-21

GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC

Sunday, September 3, 2023

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Romans 12: 9-21

12:9 Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; 12:10 Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. 12:11 Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. 12:12 Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. 12:13 Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. 12:14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. 12:15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. 12:16 Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. 12:17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. 12:18 If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 12:19 Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." 12:20 No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." 12:21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

The Word of the LORD

Thanks be to God.

For Jesus followers, love is not a romantic notion, it is a public virtue. Love is the fabric of beloved community—the impulse to care, to be there for someone, to live out of the deep ways we are connected and the ways we need to be able to trust each other to thrive.

For followers of Jesus, love is not sentimentality. And love is not reserved for the chosen few, for our favorites. Love is a way of life—and Paul makes something else very clear to the Jesus followers in Rome—love isn't love if it is fake or feigned, if it's hypocritical, if it's only felt for certain people, and a pretense with others.

Love is a way of life—not just in your home or in your personal life, but in all your interactions and in the public square.

Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.

I find it a bitter irony that so many of those who want to claim the United States is a “Christian nation” are the same people who have pushed to thin out our society’s social safety net, they have systematically created and increased suffering for most of their fellow citizens through the policies they have passed or supported.

If this was truly a nation that centered the values of the Christian gospel, there would be universal health care, there would be collective bargaining in our workplaces, there would be living wages for all workers, there would be restorative Justice baked into our systems of justice instead of patterns of oppression and racism.

For Jesus followers love is a public virtue, a political virtue. It is the practice that should define our commerce and our conflict. This love is not about self-interest—it is about the well-being of all.

Christian nationalism is really not about Christianity at all—it is a cover for white nationalism—tribalism, xenophobia, and concepts of the supremacy of white people. Christianity is less about the practice of a faith than it is a heritage, a history. In fact, data reveals that many who espouse a Christian nationalist view also see themselves as “secular” when it comes to church attendance or religious affiliation.

So, Grace Covenant, we must see the important distinction between the espousal of Christian nationalism and the belief that love is a public virtue.

Love in the public square is not about cultural superiority, it is about cultural humility. And it is about compassion not conformity. If you are wondering about the conformity part—please check out last week’s message.

Love in public—or as Dr. Cornel West, an outspoken public intellectual of our time, says: “Justice is what love looks like in public.”

Let’s hear Dr. West break it down for us.

(Play Cornel West video)

Love as a public virtue connects the practices of power sharing and fairness and human dignity and human well-being to the way love teaches us to truly take care of each other.

And there are plenty of examples of this revolutionary love that Jesus embodied being the fuel for social change that makes out common life more equitable, more humane, more just.

The civil rights movement is one huge example. And there are easy connections between belief in love as a liberating public virtue and the ways we treat workers in our economy. Love as a public virtue means we have a value that is more important than productivity.

“Let your love be genuine. Hate what is evil.”

Commodifying human beings is evil.

Productivity as more important than human well-being is evil.

Only Western industrialized nation without a right to health care.

Love hates what is evil, and never flags in zeal when love is at stake.

Love is all about solidarity.

Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

In the US, our economy is built on disrupting solidarity from getting a foothold. That’s why it has been increasingly difficult for workers to organize. And white racism has been the most effective tool against workers' rights that the ownership class has capitalized on.

It can be hard to see in our economy right now—but there are ways that workers are increasingly organizing in multiracial collectives to demand more humane working conditions and the right to collectively bargain—the solidarity of hourly and low wage workers in America has been systematically disrupted and discouraged by the white owning class since before the official founding of this country. And racism among the white working class is their ace in the hole.

Some historians mark the birth of the legal concept of whiteness and the equation of chattel slavery with black people to the aftermath of Bacon’s Rebellion in the 17th century—when Black and white people who were living impoverished lives joined forces—unfortunately they joined forces to support a wealthy white man’s assertion that all indigenous people should be treated as enemies. Even so, the effect of the rebellion was to chill the hearts of the ruling class. Their greatest fear was not indigenous people, but black and white workers banding together against the ruling class.

That same fear of multi-racial worker solidarity has systematically passed laws in many states, often with the support of the federal government, to make organized labor harder and harder to accomplish in many states especially over the last 40 years—and the south is the worst in terms of anti-worker, anti-union practices.

If you have not already, read or watch or listen to the 1619 chapter on capitalism. It tells the story of Amazon workers trying to organize for safer workplaces and a living wage and humane benefits.

One historian describes “Racial capitalism” - there is no such thing as a race neutral capitalism in the US.

Productivity and product above human beings thrives when workers cannot organize their solidarity.

Amazon is second largest employer in the USA - 1.3 Trillion \$ worth.

Extracting labor for maximum profit—amazon has perfected the model. They have an 80% higher injury rate than other warehouse industries.

Another reason unions are struggling: racism—white workers are often more likely to choose white solidarity over taking steps for their own interest in the workplace if it means organizing with black people.

Capitalism and racism work together.

The 1619 chapter tells the story of Amazon workers successfully organizing in New Jersey. In 2022 union organizers won more union votes than they had in the last 20 years.

The more white and Black people and brown people know our true history, the more love as a public virtue can thrive.

Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. 12:17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. 12:18 If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Remember to decolonize Paul’s words—they are not about submission, they are not about accepting oppression, they are not about silencing the voices of those who are saying they need our country to do better by them—Paul’s words confronted Empire’s murderous greed. They were not spoken to pacify the working class. These words are about how to build a truly peaceful community—not through revenge, but through repair; not through tribalism, but through solidarity.

The ways land was stolen, cultures criminalized, wealth concentrated, and the ways these things are still happening—this is why we talk about white supremacy every week, Grace Covenant, because we believe LOVE is a public virtue—and I know that we believe that

because we follow a man named Jesus—and he put his life on the line for that love and he told us “no greater love has a person than to lay down their lives” for the love of their siblings, neighbors, even for strangers in the human family. There is no greater love than the love that reveals itself, in the public square as true justice and repair.

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Love is not a private emotion, it's not something we keep behind closed doors in our bedrooms. It's a powerful emotion that frees us from fearing each other, from fearing reprisals for asking for what can help us live healthy lives. Love is the language of liberation—love is the fuel of freedom—love is the medicine that Jesus came to administer to the human race.

We need to take our medicine and let it do its work—not avoid it and try to act like we don't need it.

We cannot keep tolerating the economic conditions in our country and say we are a loving people. Love is not haughty, but humble. Love is not fearful, but courageous. Love does not hoard, it hopes and it shares. Love does not play it safe, it risks itself because what's life worth without love.

Love is the reason we gather. Love is the reason we keep struggling for the world to change, Love is the reason we believe, we stake our lives on, this world being a place where all people can thrive.

Justice is love in public.

And for Jesus followers, we know that love is the only way justice in the public square can be for all people and not just for white people who have the money to pay for it.

“We will let our love be genuine.”

Say it with me, Grace Covenant: “Genuine love shows up in public”

“Genuine love shows up in public.”

Thanks be to God.