

Love is Honest (Romans 12:9)

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

The three wise men who gave gifts to Jesus are known as the Magi, and one of the most famous short stories in the world is one written by O'Henry, an American shortstory writer, called "The Gift of The Magi." It is a story about a young couple who loved each other more every year they were married, and yet they had very little money. So when Christmas came along they had no money at all for buying presents. In fact, they had only two things in their possession that were of any value or that they were proud of at all. One was the young woman's blonde hair which came right down to her waist, and the other was a gold watch that the husband had that had been given to him by his father.

The week before Christmas they went around the stores shopping like everybody else except that they had no money to buy anything. They would keep going to two stores especially. One had a pair of golden combs that both knew would look just beautiful in the wife's hair, and the other store had a beautiful gold chain that would look magnificent on the husband's watch. They wandered around those stores repeatedly, even though they felt they had no chance of ever buying those things.

So Christmas morning arrived and they came down to the living room where they usually exchanged presents. The husband could see a light of excitement in his wife's eyes and she could see the same in his eyes, except his changed to horror when he saw that she had cut off all her hair. Dejectedly he brought out the present he had bought for her. You can guess. The golden combs! Except that now she had no hair to put them in, so it was useless.

However, she picked herself up and continued to be excited and she brought out her present for him, which was the gold chain for his watch. He smiled and said, "You obviously sold your hair to buy the chain for my watch, but I don't have a watch. I pawned my watch to buy the combs for your hair." O'Henry says these two foolish people stumbled on the central factor in giving gifts -- that of love. If there isn't love behind giving a gift it is of no value, and if there is love it doesn't much matter if the gift works out right or not; it is the love that counts.

That is why Paul leads us into the subject that we are going to begin talking about over these next few weeks. You remember he has been telling us about the gifts God gives us. He has given every one of us a certain gift that we can exercise in order to bring His world back under His will. Then Paul says that those gifts are of no use unless the same thing governs them as governed the heart of the one who gave us those gifts. The God who is our Creator, who gave us those gifts, gave us those gifts because He loves us. Unless we are governed by that same love in our hearts, those gifts will bring only coldness to the people that they are exercised upon. They will bring only death to you yourself. Paul begins to talk about love, the love with which you and I are to exercise the gifts that we have been given.

It might be good to turn to the verse and see how God puts it to us. It is in Romans 12:9. Let's begin with verse 6 just to remind us what Paul has been talking about. "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; he who teaches, in his teaching; he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who contributes, in liberality; he who gives aid, with zeal; he who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness." In other words, some of you are good at encouraging other people, some of you are

good at advising and counseling other people, some of you are good at giving gifts financially to others, some of you are good at helping other people, but all those things are useless unless they are motivated by this next verse: "Let love be genuine." It doesn't matter how great a counsellor you are, it doesn't matter how great an organizer you are. If your love is not genuine, that gift will not bring that person under God's will or closer to Him.

Now it is interesting how God assumes that love will be the central factor in our lives. He doesn't say, "Look, I want you to love!" He actually says, "Let love be genuine. I am assuming that you people who are the recipients of so much love from the Person who made the earth" (And that is pretty obvious, isn't it? Where did we get our bodies from? Where did we get the flowers from? We are all in the same boat. There is nothing that we have that we have not been given.)-- so our Creator is saying, "I assume that you realize that the whole basis of everything you see around you is love. Somebody has loved you to give you all these things. I'm assuming you all know that the central factor in life is love.

I don't feel that I should have to tell you to love. It must be obvious to you that somebody has loved you a lot to give you everything that you possess today. I'm assuming that you know that I am love and that I am your Creator. I made you in my image and therefore the only way life will work is if the heart of it all and the basis of it all is love."

I think it is easy in our world -- a world of Jaruzelski and Siberia and recession -- to lose sight for a moment of the fact that everything we have has been given to us, and it has been given by Somebody who loves us. The only basis of life is love. I don't know if you have really settled that in your own mind. We have done our best to wipe it out, but God assumes that. He doesn't say, "Now, I'm going to tell you a big secret. I want you to love." No, He doesn't. He just says, "Listen, I'm assuming that you all know love is the basis of life. I'm saying to you: 'Let love be genuine.'"

Our RSV says, "Let love be genuine." The King James says, "Let love be without dissimulation." Phillips says, "Let us have no imitation Christian love." The Living Bible says, "Don't just pretend that you love others, really love them." The Greek is "he agape" which is "the love". And we are to "let it be anupokritos." "An" is "not", "upokritos" you can guess. The "u" became a "y" in English and it becomes our word "hypocrite". The Greek says literally, "Let your love not be hypocritical." Let it not be pretending love, let it not be dissembling love, let your love be undissembled. Let it be without dissimulation. Let it be simple and straight and plain. Don't pretend about it.

I don't know if you know where the word "upokritos" came from, but it means "under a mask." In Greek tragedy they used to dress in masks, partly because the people were so far away from them and they wanted the characters to be plainly known so they put a mask on that plainly showed that the guy was a villain or a good guy. So God says, "Let your love not be something that is hidden behind a mask. Let your love not be something that is disguised, something that pretends or something that assumes a character. Don't be assuming a character that you aren't truly and really inside in your heart. Let your love be real."

Over the next weeks we are going to spend a lot of time trying to find out what real love is and contrasting it with all the wrong ideas that we in our twentieth century have of love. So we are going to spend some time on this verse, but loved ones, could we just settle the fact this morning that God says to us, "Now I'm assuming from all the signs that you people have around you that you know that you exist only because Somebody else loves you. I am assuming that you yourselves see that your lives will only work if they are run through and flooded and surrounded by your love. Now I'm saying to you 'Let your love be real. Let it be real and true and genuine, not something that you

put on."

The basis of all that is in I John 4:7: "Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God; for God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his son to be the expiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No man has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us."

What is love unfeigned and love undissembled? It is Jesus hanging, bleeding on the cross and saying to you, "I want to assure you that all the evil that you have in your heart that has to be destroyed, I have taken into my own heart and I am bearing it through hell's fire so that it will be destroyed forever and so that you will be able to go into my Father's presence without fear of extermination." That is love unfeigned. No bluff. The man is dying. He is dying and he is telling you that He is taking the worst that you have produced in your heart into His own heart freely because He loves you. That is love. It gives completely and without reservation, gives itself for the highest purpose known to man. That is what real love unfeigned and undissembled is.

Loved ones, I would just ask you and myself, "Is love the basic attitude in our lives? Is love the basic attitude that we have to the people that we work with? Do we love our colleagues at work? Do we love the fellow students we have in our classes at school? Is love the governing attitude in our relationship to them or is it competition, rivalry and trying to keep one-up? Is our basic attitude to the people that we live with, either our family or relatives or roommates, the basic attitude of love? Is our life girded around about with love?"

It is horrifying, isn't it, how we can so often find that our life is governed by paranoia or competitiveness or insecurity or struggling to keep our heads above water, but not governed by love. Yet, God is saying to us, "Look, that is the only thing that makes life work." Could it not be that that is why you and I have so much trouble with things in life? Could it be that what your marriage needs is a bit more love? It is very interesting these days that we talk so much about communication and think that communication will solve everything in marriage. Well, communication helps, but what marriage most needs is love. It is the same in our labor relationships in our businesses. What they most need is love. Actually if you and I were talking together alone without all these other people around, you know that you would say, "Yes, love has some kind of softening effect on me. When I see somebody really loves me, I would do anything for them. It makes everything worthwhile; it makes everything possible if a person loves me."

Loved ones, that is why I say to all of you this morning that God is saying to us, "Let love, which is the only cement that will hold all of us together, be real and undissembled, without dissimulation; let it be genuine." Let it not be something that you assume in order to impress somebody. Because the truth is, even if love sells its hair to buy a chain for your watch and you sell your watch to buy combs for love's hair, somehow the Christmas is the greatest success because love was there. It is the same with our lives. Love makes everything work. So let us accept what God says, that love is to be the basic attitude of each of us in our whole lives towards everyone we meet -- the drivers on the road, the people in the stores. Pray that God will make clear to us what love is. I would encourage you to look at different parts of your lives and see if there is any love in them. Is there any love in my relationship to my wife? Is there any love in my relationship to my friends at work? It might surprise us how cold things have been allowed to get for us.

