

1.18.2026 Second Sunday after the Epiphany (Romans 12:6-16)

In my younger days I spent quite a bit of time working on cars. Back then it was a hobby of mine, and therefore much of that time was devoted to some sort of upgrade or modification, but now, if I'm in the garage at all, the time is probably being spent on routine maintenance or repairs. As you can imagine, over the years I've bought a lot of replacement parts, and one thing experience has taught me is the importance of buying a genuine part. I can't tell you the number of times I've been in a situation where I'm trying to get a car repaired right away, and in this rush to get it all put back together I've settled for a cheap, imitation replacement part just because it was available that day, rather than waiting for one to be sent from the manufacturer. I bought a door handle once that wouldn't allow the door to lock, an alignment kit that kept the car out of alignment, and a throttle control sensor that worked just fine, unless you actually planned to use your car to go somewhere, because every time you pressed on the gas pedal it died immediately.

Time and again I've seen the difference between the way what's genuine works as it should, and what is counterfeit does not, and a statement St. Paul was inspired to make in the Epistle we read today reminds us, not of the relatively minor importance of genuine replacement parts, but instead, of the eternal importance of *genuine* love. In this passage, Paul is writing to Christians about different gifts we've each been given by the grace of God, and exhorting us to use these gifts of grace as God intends. "*Let us use them,*" he declares, "*if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness,*" and after giving these instructions, Paul makes a statement that is certain to challenge every Christian. He declares, "*Let love be genuine...*" (Romans 12:6-9).

Genuine love is the mark of a true Christian. In a familiar verse, Jesus said, "*By this all people will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another*" (John 13:35), and the love by which all people will know that we not only believe, but belong to Christ, is not the love of affection, friendship, or romance. Instead, the love we will be known by is, in the greek,

called agape.

Agape is the first fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). Agape is the unconditional, self-sacrificial love that flows from God the Father, through God the Son, and is poured into our hearts by God the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5) to the end that we may share God's love with all people, by laying down our lives for the world that our Savior Christ laid down His life to save. Agape is the perfect love of God, the love we are called to reflect in this world, the love that Jesus so perfectly and painfully demonstrated for us on the Cross at Calvary.

On the Cross our Lord not only died for us, on the Cross He showed us what genuine love truly is, and in pouring out His life, He taught us how to love. St. John writes, "*We love because He first loved us*" (1 John 4:19). If God had not loved us first, we wouldn't know how to love, nor would we have love to give, because God is love (1 John 4:8). He is the Source. We might picture Him as the fountain of love, and we are the stream that flows from Him. He is the sun, and we are His radiant beams. God is, in Christ, the True and Living Vine, and we are the branches that bear the fruit of His Divine love. Consider the truth that if God, who is the only Source of genuine love, if He lives in us and we in Him, then His love ought to spring from us as naturally and necessarily as a stream of water flows from a fountain, a beam of light shines from the sun, and good fruit is found on a branch attached to the Vine.

The love of God flows, shines, and springs from authentic Christians necessarily, and notice in each of those examples that the outpouring of genuine love doesn't depend on the worthiness of the one who receives it. Streams of water flow to the lowest point, beams of light shine brightest in the darkest places, and good fruit is often consumed by those who picked it with dirty hands. God doesn't love us because we are lovable. Instead, as we read in Scripture, "*God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us*" (Romans 5:8). God loves us, not because we are lovable. God loves us because He is love. His nature is love. His essence is love, and as "*sons and daughters of God through faith in Christ Jesus*" (Galatians 3:26) the love of God that He pours into our hearts must not be reserved for those we deem lovable. God's love must flow to the lowest

point, it must shine in the darkest place, and bear fruit in the most barren land.

It is a high call, a Divine call to allow the love of God to work in you, and through you in that way. In this world, as it is in the garage, it's much easier to just try to put things together ourselves, to settle for the cheap imitation, rather than patiently and prayerfully ask, seek, and knock to the end that we may receive and share what is genuine. It's easier to settle for what's counterfeit, to love only those we find easy to love, but in doing so we dam the stream, put a basket over the light, and cut off the branch that was meant to bear the fruit of God's love for all people. It's a high call to *let love be genuine*, and yet in his second epistle St. Peter assures us that this call to love is not beyond our reach. In that text St. Peter boldly declares that we, through the "*exceedingly great and precious*" promises of the Gospel, might become "*partakers of the Divine nature*" (2 Peter 1:4). This high call to love is within our reach, because through the Person and Work of Jesus Christ, you and I partake, we share in God's Divine nature, in His life and love.

We are frail, fallen human beings by nature, but it hasn't always been that way. In the beginning God created humanity in His own "*image and likeness*" (Genesis 1:27), God formed man from the dust of the ground, and God breathed into the first human the "*breath of life*" (Genesis 2:7), and in this unique, personal act of creation God set us apart from every other creature, and invited humanity into union and communion with Him.

As you know our first parents rebelled in the Garden, and in their Fall the intimacy we were created for was broken, but through the promises of the Gospel our relationship with God is restored. By grace through faith in our Savior Christ, we've been given a precious gift that we carry in jars of clay, the gift of a new breath of life - and greater love. Not only this fleeting, temporal life, but life eternal. Not only the human love of affection or friendship, but the Divine, sacrificial love of God for all people, and this gift that God breathed into us at our baptism, and again in Confirmation, is meant to be poured out in this world. This is the high call, and Jesus presented it to us not only as a call, but as a commandment, saying, "*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another*" (John 13:34).

To command those who don't know Christ to love as He loves would be unfair, but to command Christians, those who are partakers of the Divine nature, those in whom God dwells, to command you and I to love as perfectly and painfully as God loves is simply a command to be who we are. Drops of water flow from a fountain, rays of light stream from the sun, branches naturally bear fruit when they're attached to the vine. Should it be any different for us?

Our Creator, who is the only source of genuine love, has breathed into our hearts His own life and His own love. Therefore we ought to love as God loves, and to do anything less is to settle for a cheap imitation that this world so conveniently offers at every turn. Counterfeit life and counterfeit love surround us, but we weren't made to run on anything that is not of God. So, don't settle. Don't love only those people you find easy to love, because that is a cheap imitation. Instead, respond to the Divine call of the Father who created you, the Son who redeemed you, and the Spirit who lives in you, and let love be genuine.