

My first Sunday as a pastor found me before a small congregation that was hurting and wounded. I was young, zealous, and totally inexperienced. I preached to this group of 45 people and soon found myself meeting them one by one after the service.

A man named Phil came and introduced himself. Phil and his wife had served as medical missionaries for about a decade. After some really painful situations, Phil and Karen made the decision to return back to NWOntario where he would continue practicing medicine.

As Phil introduced himself, he invited me down to the hospital the next day to get a tour and to meet some of the patients. “Anything you need, Andrew. I’m here for you.”

Over the years, I discovered Phil to be reliable, wise, and loving. He was a listening ear when I was confounded. He was a great conversation partner who challenged my thinking and my soul. He invited me out horseback riding and cross-country skiing, only to end our time with hot chocolate by his fireplace.

This was Phil. He was ready to help repair things with his toolbox, offer pastoral care when a soul was hurting, and moved into some of the most painful situations in church life to love people and help them.

When I read Romans 12:9, I can’t help but think about Phil. “Let love be genuine,” says Paul. Christians are called to be full of love because God has poured his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5). Because of the mercies of God, Christians are called to lay down their lives sacrificially out of devotion to God. Because of the mercies of God, Christians are to have their minds renewed. And what does a sacrificial, devoted, renewed life look like?

It looks like love. In Rom. 12:9-21, Paul speaks about a love for the Church – fellow Christians – and a love for the world. This morning we will just consider what it means to love the Church as people who have experienced the mercy of God. And we need to think about how we will love one another because, as we shared on Friday in our TableTalk, we are planning to reopen as a church on Sunday, June 28<sup>th</sup>. In our anticipation to meet together again, I want us to be prepared that while some things will be very different, the most important things remain the same: the Gospel is true and the Gospel empowers love.

### **Love Genuinely**

The only way we can truly love one another is due to the love that God has for us. And this is the love that God has for us: when we were his enemies, when we hated him, when we didn’t want to bother with God, God loved us, sent his Son to die for our sins, and poured his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. His love sought us out and won us over. God’s love is a pursuing love, a sacrificial love, a never-ending love.

So what should our love look like for one another as Christians? It’s to look the same. Genuine. Desiring the good of one another. Wanting the best.

This statement – let love be genuine – is so simple and foundational to Christian conduct. Yet it is hard to put into practice because much of our lives is not as genuine. We live in a culture that encourages us to brand ourselves, present an image of the ideal us. We feel the pressure to look and sound a certain way. So we don't put up pictures of our bad day or average day on social media; we curate our pictures and fashion them to tell a story about ourselves.

We've learned this through how corporations and businesses manage their image. Protecting that image means we want people to think well of us. But love is not to be an image; it must be a genuine reality. Our love isn't to be a mere toleration of one another as Christians that puts on the mask of civility that speaks poorly of someone behind their back. Jesus taught his disciples that by our love for one another as Christians the world will know that we are his disciples (Jn. 13:35). Pretending we love one another when all we can muster up is toleration will not bear witness that we are Christ's disciples!

### **Love Rightly**

Now all this talk about love might give us the idea that love is soft and sentimental. We might think that love is always oozing with niceness and politeness. But there is a ferociousness to love: Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good.

We have this idea that the opposite of love is anger and rage. But that is not the case. When you truly love someone, we will defend and protect them, even to the point of feeling angry that injustice is being done to them. So if your child were to come down with a terrible disease that was ravaging their body, it's not surprising to hear someone say, "I hate cancer." The ferociousness of love recognizes that there is good and evil.

It is easier to hate a disease because it is impersonal; it is harder to hate injustice, racism, and abuse because there is usually another person who has committed the act of injustice, racism, or abuse. We are not called to hate people, but to hate the enemy of their soul. We are not called to the destruction of other people but their good. So should we be angry at racism and injustice? Yes! Should we be angry at rioting and destruction of property? Yes! And this is where Paul says we are to love rightly – hate evil, cling to what is good. These two must go together. If all we do is act with outrage, we will slowly find that our hearts are filled with outrage at people rather than love and compassion. We have to cling to these good truths – people are not our enemy.

Loving rightly means that we need to think sensibly, wisely, and rightly about various issues that have the potential to divide us. What is more important to you – that we all agree on issues or that we disagree with love and constructive dialogue? The opposite of love is not hate, but indifference. We will be passionate about what is the best way forward, how to work together as a church. But many of these issues are disputable matters, not matters of evil and good. So let's be ferocious about protecting our love for one another and not let anything come between us.

### **Love Abundantly**

Here is the commitment we need to have to one another: “Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honour.” A genuine, right love for one another is not half-hearted or given hesitantly. It is given with abundance.

How abundant is this love? It is the kind of love a healthy family has for one another. There's that phrase “brotherly affection.” We are called to love each other as a family seeks to love one another.

But the love we have for one another is to run deeper than a family – there's to be a competitiveness about it. You are working for my good? Well, let me see if I can out-love you! This love isn't done for show, it's done for well-being.

Now as many of you heard and read on Friday, we are planning to reopen for public worship on June 28<sup>th</sup>. Many of us are eager to gather back together. We want to see each other, hug one another, and be encouraged by one another. And this attitude makes me overjoyed!

At the same time, we're not back to normal. On Friday in our TableTalk we shared what this season is going to look like. We will have two services at 9 am and 11 am. We will have to meet at 30% capacity or less. We will have to register for what service we are coming to. We won't be able to just show up or arrive last minute and expect we can get to our seats on time. We will require everyone 16+ to wear a mask once we are inside the building. Why? Because we want to love one another abundantly.

In fact, the kind of love that Paul is talking about is a deep love that best friends have for one another combined with the solidarity of the love that a healthy family has. There's a commitment to one another that runs as deep as blood. And because we are committed to Christ and to one another, we are going to go above and beyond what is asked of us to protect one another, love one another, and ensure one another's safety. We're going to outdo one another in showing honour. The stronger aren't going to stand in judgment of those who are weaker. We'll respect the fact that some people aren't ready to return the first Sunday, and we'll encourage them to work through their concerns, fears, and worries. We'll respect those who are truly vulnerable and want to lavish love upon them because they aren't ready medically to return. While some things aren't the same, the Christian life that lays our lives down on the altar as a living sacrifice will be our spiritual act of worship.

So if you're struggling with the changes, if you're finding it hard to get your head around what things are going to look like, know that the motivation is love. And love is going to look like we're looking out for the best interests of Christ's name and one another as the family of God.

When I left my first pastorate, the church had a farewell for my family. And I was able to say a few words at the end. There was one man that I wanted to thank for making my first

pastorate a success – Phil. On my first Sunday, a young, green pastor who was vulnerable and stepping into a church that was hurt had someone who genuinely loved me, hated the bickering, and despite the disappointments he had experienced on the mission field was committed to outdoing everyone in loving me. Phil had told me, “On that first Sunday, I vowed in my heart to do everything possible to make you succeed.” And he had.

Let's be that kind of church – the kind of church that is going to love each other so deeply that we're going to do everything possible to help one another succeed in this next stage of reopening.