

“\$.025 at a Time”
Romans 12:9-21

It's like running into your childhood friend with whom you were inseparable some twenty on at the mall and not recognizing them. Like seeing your tattooed, hippy brother dressed in a suit and tie and having to rub your eyes to see if it's really him or a classmate who loses the weight of one adult and disbelieving its her until she speaks your name. I honestly wondered if I was reading the Book of Romans when I began reading for this week's sermon or did I accidently open to John 12 or Hebrews 12. I mean, for eleven chapters or nineteen weeks we have seen and heard from "one Paul" and now another, "unrecognizable Paul" speaks for the first time in Romans 12. For eleven chapters we have slogged through ground that is uneven and miry. We have tripped and fallen. We have stumbled and turned to see if it would be easier to simply turn around and go back to where we began. But like persistent sojourners we have persevered and finally we are at the point where all this *information* has led us to a place of a possible *transformation*. But with my sincerest apology we must go back, just slightly, just for a moment, so that we can be reminded of the great transition in the Book of Romans. Because it's at Romans 12 verse 1 and following to be exact where we think we can actually take a breath, relax even and for the first time maybe understand what we are reading and not find it necessary to read the earthy words of Eugene Peterson's, "The Message" for clarity. But don't rest just yet. Don't treat the words that come in the next four chapters (12-16) as "simple" words because they are not simple or easy words. The comparison of Romans 1-11 and Romans 12-16 is like reading everything you can about changing your lifestyle and eating healthy, for example. You come across an expert's opinion of what you should be eating and why you should be eating it. There are scientific words you must look up that describe the results of eating unhealthy. And you read some more. And finally you believe you have grasped the problem with your eating as well as the solution to your problem. In fact you even begin to see aisles of the supermarket you have never seen before and food from places you cannot even pronounce. But nothing changes because we are unwilling to begin the transformational process. We know what we should do - it's just that we don't do it. The "it" *therefore* are upwards of **thirty imperatives** in this reading alone. Did you notice them?

Love the unattractive people but with repentance and sincerity. (v.9) Love but don't make the person an idol who leads you to allow him/her to sin or you to sin. (v.9) Love with dogged affection over the long haul, no matter what. Stay loyal. (v.10-12) Love by making people feel honored and valuable. Listen and show utmost consideration to those around you. (v.10) Love by being generous in a practical way with your home, money, and time. (v.13) Love without bitterness. Don't pay back or hold resentment against others. (v.14) Love with empathy. Be willing to be

emotionally involved with others. (v.15) Love with humility. Be willing to associate with people who are very different than you. (v.16) Love by not avoiding hostile people, but planning appropriate kind and courteous words and deeds. (v.21) And that's just on the subject of "love." "Thirty instructions - all of them meant to put flesh on the bones on the idea that Allyson so eloquently described last week and what Paul calls the "*renewing of our minds.*" (12:2)

You see, with all this heavy theology in our back pocket now (Romans 1-11) - an understanding of the sin in our life, righteousness through faith, and God's election it would be easy to become proud and pompous - become what the world so often accuses us of being - *disingenuous* rather than genuine which just happens to be the exact word Paul begins our passage with this morning. (12:9) Although "new" instructions are given to the Romans Church they are not really "new" words, per se. So don't feel too alarmed if you think, "I've heard this before" because in many ways Paul "borrows" the words of Romans 12 from Jesus himself as Paul preaches his own version of the "Sermon on the Mount" here in Romans 12:9-21. If read aloud it may sound like a laundry list or rules or advice but in the Greek those verbs aren't commands at all for they are in the indicative case - which means **it ought to read but even more lived out**. The words of Romans 12:9-21 are not simply words but actions. Maybe that's why In "Mere Christianity" C. S. Lewis wrote, "Do not waste your time bothering whether you 'love' your neighbor, act as if you did."

So without spending an extra thirty weeks on the Roman Road looking at these thirty imperatives (which none of us really want - if we were honest) it might be better to simplify them into one - "Jesus' second Great Commandment to love your neighbor as yourself. That's really the common denominator in many of those verses. And for those of you may be wondering about the first part of that commandment - the part of loving God - it's in the opening verses of Romans 12. The "presenting of our bodies, the sacrificial life and the not conforming to this world but renewing of our minds is in fact, as Paul says, our worship of God and the **centering** of our lives. And it is from there, as we read on in Romans, that the living out or this "*centering*" is done in love. "Love is not a suggestion - it is mandatory for Christians - it is obligatory. "...love in the biblical sense obligates in a compelling sense. It locks us into active concern for others." (Fred Craddock, "Preaching for the Christian Year" A). I love how Peterson begins this passage by saying, "**Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it.**" (12:9) "In his book on Romans, Paul Achtemeier discusses our scripture for this morning. Among other things he says: "Love is ... the rule of the Christian life. But can love be a "rule?" Indeed, can love be commanded at all? Emotions are not that much under our control. To be commanded to love therefore appears to be totally unrealistic; and it will lead either to frustration, since we are being asked to do something we cannot do,

namely love a person we find unlovely, or it will lead to sham and hypocrisy when we pretend to love someone we really do not love at all. How then are we to understand this command to "love?" According to Paul Achtemeier this "... *centers* not on emotions but on actions. To love someone is actively to promote that person's good. To be commanded to love one's enemy means that one is commanded to work for that person's good, not harm. To love an enemy therefore does not mean primarily to change one's emotional state toward that person so much as it means to do good for that enemy, regardless of what one's emotional response to that person may happen to be" (Source: Paul Achtemeier, Romans) and then living it out in small but powerful ways. An author I know once wrote that (living out our Christian lives) is often like taking a \$1000 bill and laying (it before God and saying,) "Here's my life, Lord. I'm giving it all." "But the reality for most of us is that he sends us to the bank and has us cash in the \$1000 for quarters. So we go through life putting out 25 cents here and 50 cents there. Listen to the neighbor kid's troubles instead of saying, 'Get lost.' Go to a committee meeting. Give a cup of water to a shaky old man in a nursing home. (This is love) He continues, "usually giving our life to Christ isn't glorious. It's done in all those little acts of love, 25 cents at a time. It would be easy to go out in a flash of glory; it's harder to live the Christian life (and love) little by little over the long haul." (Source: Fred Craddock) Those "larger than life" acts of love we leave up to another.

I didn't recognize him at first, not to say he was ever recognizable – I mean standing out with his looks for he was "normal" looking, plain even. But what he did never seemed to change or waver. But now his appearance had changed. Now he was disfigured, bruised and beaten beyond recognition. His body broken. His blood poured out. Most wondered why he would do what he did – suffer and then lay down his life for another but not just "someone" but everyone – not just his friends but his worst enemies. There is no other answer other than saying his "love was genuine." He was "patient in suffering" and "persevered in prayer." He "blessed those who persecuted him" and he "did not curse" them. He "associated with the lowly" and he "did not repay evil with evil". He "fed the hungry", "gave water to the thirsty" and "overcame evil with good". He loved from the center of his being because He was Love – love in action, that is, and he calls us to do likewise. So as you take this bread and drink this cup, like Christ, love from center, 25 cents here and 50 cents there, for it at the center where we find God. Let us pray...