

# **Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Epistle**

**True Love**

**Romans 12:9-21**

**Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 17)**

**Analysis by Carolyn Schneider**

9 Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; 10 love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. 11 Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. 12 Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. 13 Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. 14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. 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. 17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. 18 If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 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." 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." 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

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## **DIAGNOSIS: What We Do To Our Enemies Returns to Us.**

### **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *We Have Enemies.***

When the Bible talks about enemies, it usually does not mean the people that we hate, but the people who hate us. We all have enemies. You can probably list them by name if you stop to think about it. Some of these enemies may be personal enemies: the coworker who insults you publicly; the fellow member of the church who spreads lies about you; the spouse who continually criticizes or even strikes you. On the other hand, some of these enemies may be collective enemies, those who hate a larger group with which you identify yourself. For instance, our public media are full of enemy language as they describe the attitudes of Al Qaeda, Saddam Hussein, or the Palestinian militants toward Americans.

### **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *We Rely on Powerful Systems To Rid Us of Our Enemies.***

We are usually perplexed about why people hate us. Sometimes we truly are hated for no reason that is under our control, as in the case of spousal abuse; the problem lies inside the one who hates us. But, in other cases, self-reflection reveals that we may have provided plenty of unnecessary provocation to hatred, as, for example, in our national behavior. But self-reflection is very painful and thus it is seldom undertaken. It is simpler to try to take revenge on our enemies. We rely on our social, legal, political, and military systems to destroy those who hate us. We like to think that these systems reflect the will of God, that God has the same enemies we have and the same friends we have.

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *What if our enemy is God?***

But what if God does not? What if God were to criticize us? Would we not then consider God an enemy, one who hates us? What

if we responded by using all the systems available to us to try to destroy God? Would we not then become God's enemies, those who hate God? In verse 20, Paul quotes Proverbs 25:21-22: "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." What if God says to us, "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink" (Matthew 25:41-42)?

## **PROGNOSIS: God Transforms Enemies into Lovers.**

**Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution)** – *Jesus Blesses a New People into Life.*

In fact, God did come to us in the person of Jesus, since we are no different from the people to whom Jesus came. Jesus criticized us for using the Law to impoverish people, to get our way over others, to scapegoat others, and to justify our own hypocrisy. In response, all the systems of the Law were put into motion to destroy Jesus as our enemy. But Jesus insisted that the Messiah was sent by God to save, and that he would do so by suffering, being killed, and being raised (Matthew 16:21-28), not by executing judgments and getting rid of his enemies. Love is genuine, not hypocritical, and does not adopt the tactics of its opponents (Romans 12:9). In Jesus, God does not overcome evil by means of evil, but overcomes evil in goodness (Romans 12:21). God gave Jesus life out of death, making something out of nothing as in the beginning of creation. Jesus, then, is the new life of the world into which we are immersed by our baptisms, and this is what Paul is describing in Romans 12.

**Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution)** – *Lovers Overcome Evil With Good.*

This new life is one that seeks to redeem its enemies, to transform them, to include them in the new world. Paul calls

this genuine love. This love goes beyond itself to be happy with those who are happy, to be sad with those who are sad, and most of all, to stoop down to be with those who have been brought low. Lovers do not resist their enemies by pushing them down, but by standing firmly in goodness. They do not participate in evil but create a new situation to the best of their ability. Lovers no longer give cause for hatred, and when they do, they repent.

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution)** – *All Serve One Another.*

If an observer can see that everyone has enemies, (those who hate the observer), then Paul here urges that same observer to see the goodness of Jesus reflected in the family that God has been incorporated through Jesus. In this incorporation the observer sees the persecuted finding refuge, the shamed being restored to dignity, and everyone together in continual conversation with God in order to sustain hope in this new life. In a word, the observer sees peace within the community, as well as an eager and enthusiastic pursuit of peace beyond the community.