

September 3, 2023  
Love Without Barriers  
The Rev. Amanda Gerken-Nelson

I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but I do believe that Labor Day weekend is one of the true signs that summer is coming to a close

And, isn't Mother Nature giving her a glorious send off? It's been a beautiful weekend!

Some of us are settling into the renewed routine of "back to school" and some are taking one final trip to squeeze the last bit of vacation from summertime's bounty

One of my favorite aspects of summer time is the summer reading list - I didn't love it in high school (I never liked to be told to read something) but as I've grown older I have learned to love a good page turner

Just this past week we had the second gathering of our Book of 2 Months group at church where we discussed "A Year of Biblical Womanhood" which was lovely

Perhaps you read a few good page turners too?

A dear friend of mine has a tradition of re-reading "Eat Pray Love" every summer – while she may indulge in some of the other latest popular fiction and nonfiction books that are trending in the summer, she'll still always make time to read this long-time favorite

Her copy is well worn, notes in the margins, and even a few coffee and tea stains dot the pages

I recently asked her how this summer's reading went and she said she, yet again, gained new insights from her beloved, annual companion

“In a way, it’s like coming back to an old friend for a wonderful conversation” she said

I love that

And, not to be too church nerdy, but it’s how I feel about scripture, in particular Romans 12 – part of which we read this morning

the 12th chapter of Paul’s letter to the Romans is my favorite scripture – I’ve sometimes wondered if my affection for it would fade, but as I read it yet again for my sermon preparations this week I was grateful to, yet again, come back to this old friend for a wonderful conversation

“Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.”

I still love it

And, I love when somebody with more expertise than I cracks open this beloved passage in a new way for me, as David McCabe from Bethel University did in his reflection on the text

David translates the opening line from today’s Romans 12 reading as “Love is (to be) unpretentious” – our translation says “Let love be genuine”

“Love is (to be) unpretentious” David translates

He goes on: “Some translations render this verse as ‘Let love be without hypocrisy (for example [the] New American Standard Bible, [and the] Christian Standard Bible). The adjective is a negation of *hypokritos*, which

is related to the noun often used for actors, ones who wear masks: *hypokritēs*.”<sup>1</sup>

Yes this is also the etymology for the word hypocrite – the origin of the word is this Greek word for *actor* – or, *one who wears masks*

I think that’s such an interesting way to think about the definition of hypocrite, but even more, I was deeply touched by David’s reflection for how it is the negation of this word that is the definition of love in Paul’s letter

“Let love **NOT** be hypocritical”

Or to say it another way “Let love be without masks”...genuine

Let love be without masks – let your true face be shown in the name of love

Gosh what a lovely idea and what an incredibly vulnerable idea

It’s certainly not the tagline of social media, is it?

“Facebook, where we take off all our masks”

In fact, the social media tagline is “Facebook/Instagram/X where we put on the masks we want everyone else to see in order not to see the real me”

From our own process of filtering the images or even words we post on our profiles to then the literal lenses and alterations we can make to such images – social media tends to be more in the mask business than the mask-less business

And, lest we blame all social ills on these internet platforms, let us not forget that the precursors to social media were the social settings of society

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-22/commentary-on-romans-129-21-6>

where you “put on a face” to meet people: the bank, the Rotary club, and yes, even, the Church

It's not just a 21st Century evil, this mask-wearing, it is a long-time tested and proven way of projecting ourselves into society and protecting ourselves in society

But, “Let love be genuine” Paul says, “take off your masks”

Remember, in Paul's letters, he's often talking to a new church that is going through a hard time and in his letters he's guiding them, coaching them on how to be Christ's community in Rome – how to be the Body of Christ to and with each other

“Let love be genuine – take off your masks”

It seems Christ's Church has always been a place where we needed to hear this reminder that Church is not the place to wear masks and to be as if actors to each other

It was wise counsel then to the church in ancient Rome and it's wise counsel to us now

And, take this not just as counsel from your Priest, but trust that it is also the true desire of God

That you would feel capable of bringing your whole, true, maskless self into this place of worship and into the world around you

Because God sees you without your masks and shows genuine love to you

Love without masks, love without impediment, love without boundary, love without disguise

We hear this even in the Exodus reading this morning – as Moses is drawn towards the bush that is on fire but which is not consumed, God calls out to Moses: “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.”

Anathea Portier-Young, of Duke University, remarks that “Moses is told to remove his shoes. [To d]raw away the covering that has protected you. [To c]lear away the barrier between yourself and the earth so that your bare feet may touch and sink and take root in this holy ground.”<sup>2</sup>

Remove the barriers that prevent us from touching, seeing, smelling, tasting, and hearing God

For it is by grace, God removes the shame, the insecurity, the sense of unworthiness we carry with us in the world and into even this sanctuary  
Because with God, love is genuine – love is without masks

I think God was speaking through Paul’s wisdom that day he wrote his letter to the church in Rome, reminding them – and by extension of our calling as the body of Christ us – that as we approach the holiness of God’s love and grace, we don’t need to wear any of our masks or protective gear, in fact God wants us to take it off and tear it down

And, if we’re brave enough, or perhaps it’s if we feel loved enough, we might just feel capable of showing love in the world around us – outside of these walls – that is genuine, without masks.

May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-22/commentary-on-exodus-31-15-5>