

Sermon Epiphany 2 2021

January 17, 2021

Romans 12:6-16

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Today we meditate on the Epistle lesson from Paul's letter to the Romans, especially these words: **"Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor."**

In our society which has become increasingly focused on the individual and the rights of the individual, Luther is often perceived as having been the ultimate champion of standing against authority in view of these rights. And it's certainly true that without Luther's courage to make his well known confession of "Unless I am convinced by Scripture and pure reason, here I stand, I can do no other," individual freedoms would look very different today. However, this stand of Luther gives an incomplete picture of him. In particular, an experience that certainly must be understood to grasp Luther as a whole is what's called the Peasant's Rebellion.

If you're not familiar with the Peasant's Rebellion, you have to understand that as Luther published his writings in the early days of the Reformation, they caught on like wildfire. Not too long after that, many begin shifting the application of his principles about the necessity of freedom for the individual to believe to the necessity for the individual to have freedom in all realms of life. Eventually, this resulted in the peasants rallying and finally rebelling against their magistrates and lords. This rebellion Luther saw as being marked by utter dishonor of those in authority and a mob mentality. Such a mentality had no place in the lives of Christians. And Luther made that clear in his writings, even to an extent that may have been overreaching.

As I speak of a mob mentality today, I'm assuming you can see the connection to our day. We've been seeing a mob mentality operating in the riots that have been going on since the George Floyd incident last summer. We saw a mob mentality operating in storming of the capitol building last week. We see a mob mentality in manifold places in our society.

In fact, I was reading an article last week that spoke about some comments from comedian Rowan Atkinson. You might know Rowan Atkinson in his roles from the show the Blackadder and the movie Johnnie English, and he's probably best known for being Mr. Bean. Atkinson recently echoed sentiments of many comedians in critiquing what's called "cancel culture." If you're not familiar with "cancel culture," that's the phenomenon we're seeing where when someone says something not deemed

appropriate by a particular group, there is a call for them to suffer for it. For example, if an actor says something not considered appropriate by the culture, there is a call for them to lose their jobs on shows or in movies. As I say this, I think this is considered more common for those who of the far left politically to be those calling for the cancellation, but it's something you see occurring with the right politically as well.

But of this "cancel culture," Rowan Atkinson said, "*what we have now is the digital equivalent of the medieval mob, roaming the streets looking for someone to burn.*" In other words, the movements to hound and shame others into submission to particular ideals, he likens to a mob.

As we look at this as the Church, I think we can provide some insight. You see what's happening is what we as Lutherans call a confusion of the Two Kingdoms, or Two Realms. I spoke about this from one perspective in November when I preached about Jesus' words "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." It's the understanding that we as Lutherans say sees that God rules over all of creation. In the Church He rules through the ministry of the Gospel, through Word and Sacraments to give His grace. However, in the world, He rules through the governing magistrates.

As He does this then, the understanding is that when it comes to faith, to matters of the heart, the Church is involved and that's her realm of authority. However, the realm outside of the Church, the government, culture, etc., the government's job in that is to deal with that which is external. It deals with lives and concrete breaking of the law, destruction of property, actions, etc. When we see a mob mentality, often it seeks to evoke a mass response, and in our time we see it as seeking to do that by attacking the thoughts, beliefs, and ideas of people. In other words, this mob mentality and cancel culture in our day say, "if you don't think like I do, you will be controlled to do so."

And as we see that, what does this reflect? It reflects the expectation that if we just get everyone to think a certain way and they'll act in conjunction with that, then we'll have a utopia. In other words, there's this confusion that says the role of the government and culture is to exercise consequences on people to believe a certain way, because if they all believe that way, then a utopia will be manifest.

Of course, this is something that has played itself out in other times too, besides the Peasants' Rebellion at Luther's time and what we see now. I have been listening to a podcast that talks about the French Revolution. As I have been listening, I have seen so many ways where things are moving in the mob mentality that could create an environment ripe for something like that. But of course, what I found most interesting there is striking. If I recall it was even pointed out in the podcast. It's that as you look into the mentality of the French Revolution in comparison to American Revolution,

there's a distinct difference. The Revolutionaries in France, especially Robespierre, followed Jean Jacques Rousseau in saying that people are inherently good and merely corrupted by a culture and those in authority.

Now, hopefully you recognize that is not what Scripture teaches. I think you all know that, I hope you've all heard me make the point that Scripture teaches that we are all born dead in our trespasses and sins. That it teaches that we are rescued from that and only given new life by the life, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus. But what's interesting is that people seem to want to view humanity as basically good because they see it as unloving to think otherwise. Yet look at the mob mentality. What does it utterly lack? It lacks love. It's not loving to browbeat others into submission to your ideology. It's not love to shame them and to rally people to ridicule them into compliance with your ideas. If there is a real action that's sinful, sure the government has the right and authority to exercise their arm in punishing people, but this isn't thought policing.

No, instead the call is to love. **Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.** Christians, this world around us is becoming increasingly unloving in its mob mentality, but you, you are different. You are redeemed by the love of Christ. You are baptized and owned by Him. Love like Him. Love like the One who has seen your sin and your failing, and He hasn't cancelled you, but was cancelled for you. He is the One who knows where you have fallen short in your care for your neighbor, in not loving them, or being as generous to them, not explaining everything in the kindest way, and He has been crucified for that sin, rejected by the Heavenly Father, that in His resurrection you would have His mercy.

Now you love like that. You let your love be genuine, literally be unhypocritical. You abhor the evil of sin and hold strongly to that which He calls you. And I love the way Paul says this: **“outdo one another in showing honor.”** If you remember Paul says in His letter to the Philippians that Christ did not see equality with God something to be grasped, but in humility considered others' interests above His own. He outdid us in showing honor. And so we should too.

Of course, that's contrary to this whole mentality right now, isn't it? Look at the mentality of the mobs now. What are they focused on? Rights, right? It's my right to have this or that. You can't interfere with my right to do x,y, or z. And let's be clear, you have some of this on both sides of the political aisle.

Christians, what about love and honor in this? Are we actually outdoing others in showing honor? And don't think to yourself, “Yes, pastor, but I do x, y, and z, because I'm right about a,b, and c!” You see in Christ you have freedom. You have the freedom to

submit to your neighbor out of love for them. You have the freedom to submit in times even when you know that you're right. To be clear, I'm not telling you to not speak up for the confession of the faith. God tells us to speak His Word. When the culture tries to prevent that, or to prevent us from speaking what His Word says, we still speak. Or should the government tell us that we can't meet together at all, we still meet. In fact, that's a part of our freedom as Christians: we know that we can bear the consequences of doing those things against the wishes of the culture or of the government when they are opposed to God, because we have the God who will care for us eternally. We also have the duty to pursue the actions that protect those under our care, for example as parents. I have the duty as a father to care for my children as God's Word calls me to, in particular in teaching them the faith. But when it comes to the things that we think of as rights, a lot of times we could be a lot better about showing honor to others.

You see this mob mentality, this cancel culture, this focus on my rights, this is devoid of love and honor to our neighbor. I think you see it. As we've confused the two kingdoms, we've done this because we think that the Kingdom of the Left, the realm of the state and culture, we've thought that our salvation is found in these things. We've made an idol out of them. As we've done that, we've taken God out of His place and put an idol in there. The government will not save us. The culture will not save us. Only Christ will save us. And He will save us in His love. And so, we can bring love to it. We can bring true love to it.

In view of that, Christians, show that love. **Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.** It's easy for the stress of these circumstances, the anxieties of how we'll end up in the midst of things to try to prove how right we are, or how wrong someone else is. But outdo others in showing honor. Even when it's required for you to confess the faith, outdo others in showing honor. Show the love that has been shown to you. Let your love be genuine, unhypocritical. Love like you have been loved. The mobs will come and they will go. They will flare up and burn out. The consequences may even be dire. But you have the One who will not flare up and burn out, the Christ Himself. His love will sustain you into eternity. Thanks be to God. Amen.