

## LOVE: OUR CALL TO ACTION

Romans 12:9-21

A Sermon Preached by Hannah Faye Allred

13th Sunday after Pentecost | 22st Sunday in Ordinary Time

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On June 16th, 1858, delegates of the Republican State Convention nominated Abraham Lincoln to run against Stephen A. Douglas for State Senator of Illinois. In his acceptance speech, he took the podium and said the following words:

*“If we could first know where we are, and whither we are tending, we could then better judge what to do, and how to do it. We are now far into the fifth year, since a policy was initiated, with the avowed object, and confident promise, of putting an end to slavery agitation. Under the operation of that policy, that agitation has not only, not ceased, but has constantly augmented. In my opinion, it will not cease, until a crisis shall have been reached, and passed. **“A house divided against itself cannot stand.”** I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved -- I do not expect the house to fall - - but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing or all the other.”*

Lincoln’s own allies criticized his speech for being too radical, making special note of the now famous “A house divided” line. But the phrase was not original with Lincoln. In fact, he borrowed it intentionally from scripture, as it appears in all three synoptic gospels. Lincoln wanted something familiar to the public that would appeal to the moral compass of how they lived their lives. His

opponent quickly used those very words from scripture against him and his allies' critiques were correct. Lincoln lost the election.<sup>1</sup> But in turn, it made him a statesman, as he would later go on to not only be a state legislator but President, and bring an end to the fierce divisions of the Civil War in the United States. At least on paper.

That speech was 162 years ago... but it appears his words and those scriptures are still too radical for us today. Because just seven days ago, on August 23rd, another innocent, unarmed, Black man, Jacob Blake, was shot in the back multiple times in front of his own children. And is now partially paralyzed.<sup>2</sup> But it was Jacob Blake's mother, Julia Jackson, who stood in front of a throng of reporters and pleaded with the community of Kenosha, WI and beyond, who invoked these words of Lincoln and scripture:

*“Please, let’s begin to pray for the healing of our nation. We are the United States! Have we been united? Do you understand what’s going to happen when we fail because a house that is against each other cannot stand.”* She concluded by asking we use *“our hearts, our love, and our intelligence to work together, to show the rest of the world how **humans** are supposed to treat each other.”*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Abraham Lincoln, *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Blazer (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Digital Library Production Services, 2001), Vol. 3, Pg. 2. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu//lincoln?didno=lincoln3;rgn=full+text;singlegenre=All;size=25;sort=occur;start=1;subview=detail;type=simple;view=reslist;q1=a+house+divided>

<sup>2</sup> Katie Brenner, “Justice Department to Investigate Jacob Blake Shooting.” *The New York Times*, August 26th, 2020. [https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/26/us/kenosha-protests-jacob-blake-kyle-rittenhouse.html?action=click&campaign\\_id=9&emc=edit\\_nn\\_20200827&instance\\_id=21656&module=Top+Stories&nl=the-morning&pgtype=Homepage&regi\\_id=134537119&section\\_index=2&section\\_name=three+more+big+stories&segment\\_id=37015&te=1&user\\_id=ca99f75c55ab0134e25baa7dfc63eef4](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/26/us/kenosha-protests-jacob-blake-kyle-rittenhouse.html?action=click&campaign_id=9&emc=edit_nn_20200827&instance_id=21656&module=Top+Stories&nl=the-morning&pgtype=Homepage&regi_id=134537119&section_index=2&section_name=three+more+big+stories&segment_id=37015&te=1&user_id=ca99f75c55ab0134e25baa7dfc63eef4)

<sup>3</sup> “Full Statement by Jacob Blake’s Mother.” NBC News, Boston. Last modified August 25th, 2020. [boston.com/news/national-international/watch-full-statement-from-jacob-blakes-mother/2183778/](https://www.nbc.com/news/national-international/watch-full-statement-from-jacob-blakes-mother/2183778/)

In our scripture lesson today, Paul is also preaching a radical message. In his letter to the Romans, Paul is writing not to the secular community of Rome but to the Christian community *within* its churches. The book of Romans was written sometime during the reign of Nero, and although it's placed first in order of the epistles, Romans is considered by scholars to be one of Paul's final letters. His "theological last will and testament." When framed in that way, it makes more sense to read. It is a plea of its own... "Paul is making a sustained appeal for Holy Living." And he is directing that appeal to the haughty Gentile Christians within the Roman churches who fancy themselves wiser and more Christlike than their behavior would suggest.<sup>4</sup>

Paul understands that the grace we are afforded as Christians is costly. Our response to that grace is how we must shape our lives; it must be the driving force of how we orient ourselves in the world. So Paul gives us action items to follow, concrete ways in which we are to respond to God's grace through love. He shows us what a reorientation of love looks like for this Christian community in Rome. But in doing so, he does something very interesting. He qualifies it. Did you catch that, in the first sentence Mark read: "Let love be *genuine*." Suggesting that these action items have the capability to be *performed* out of obligation, rather than *responsive* from the heart.

We could dive even deeper into this idea because in the original Greek, the phrase is slightly different. A more direct, "wooden" translation would be "*love is not unfeigned*." Or even better: "*Love is not hypocritical*." And it's important to note here, Paul is not using any of the other three Greek words for love to describe

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Achtemeier, *Romans*, in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), 198.

what's happening here. He has chosen the "highest form of love," *agape* love, to describe what should be motivating these Christians. Professor Paul Achtemeier writes Paul is stating a fact about what love is rather than "giving advice concerning it," and goes on to outline "implications for Christian interaction with that fact. Those implications [are] what Paul states in verses 9-12; they all demonstrate unhyprocritical love in action."<sup>5</sup>

I don't know about you but this message feels just as radical to me, a 21st century Christian living in a liberally minded, wealthy and well-educated pocket of the northeast, as it might have felt to a 1st century Christian living in the center of the Roman Empire. We can move through the world, with zeal, and honor. We can be hospitable. We can be nice. But if we are not genuine, it is not love. Bell Hooks writes about this unhyprocritical love in action in her latest book. Her chapter on Values asks her reader to imagine what the world might look like if it wasn't driven by greed, capitalism, or power but instead by love. "*Committing to a love ethic*" she says "*transforms our lives by offering us a completely different set of values to live by.*"<sup>6</sup>

If we are operating from a genuine posture of gratitude, responding in love to grace that has first been given to us, then we wouldn't have to be told not to seek vengeance because vengeance wouldn't be what we were after. We wouldn't have to be reminded to leave room for God's wrath rather than our own, or to check our grievances against our enemies at the door because we wouldn't be trying to fill those voids in the first place. Instead, we would be motivated by love. And not just any sort of love, but that *agape* kind of love. The kind of love that surpasses all

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid 198

<sup>6</sup> Bell Hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2018), 88.

understanding. That loves when it's easy, loves when it's hard. Loves when we don't want to, when it's inconvenient, The kind of love that when things get too controversial, combative, or political, shows up anyway. A kind of love that lasts through trends, keeps loving when it's popular, and is still loving when it's not. It's a love that persists when we are overwhelmed, angry, a love that pieces us together when we are broken.

There is a pessimistic streak in me that doesn't want to believe this kind of love exists, let alone even possible. Especially after the week we have gone through. Another innocent Black man, another grieving mother. More well-meaning instagram or facebook posts. Hashtags and marches. But Jacob Blake's mother, and Breonna Taylor's mother, and George Floyd's mother, or Emmitt Till's mother didn't get the luxury of being pessimistic, so neither do I. And neither do we, as a predominately white Christian Community in the heart of New York. **We don't get to sit on our hands and feel sad. We must act.** And our actions cannot come from a place of obligation. That is nothing more than performative allyship and that only perpetuates the problem. No, our actions must come from something deeper than that, something greater than ourselves... that is where the *agape* love comes in. A love that is life-changing, and re-orienting... a *divine* love that surpasses all understanding.

I have caught glimpses of this kind of divine love over the past week. You might have, too. I saw it when Julia Jackson took to the microphone and asked everyone watching her to "*Examine our hearts. To examine our hearts and take a look at our hands. And to know that whatever shade it is, it is beautiful as well.*" I saw it when she chastised us for daring to hate what we are. "*We are humans,*" she said. "*God did not make one type of tree, or flower, or fish, or horse, or grass, or*

*rock.... How dare [we] ask [God] to make one type of human that looks just like us!”<sup>7</sup>*

Beloveds, if we were to examine our hearts what would we find? Have things continued to remain the same because we have yet to change them? If anyone should be an example to the world how humans are supposed to treat one another, shouldn't it be us? Because we know where we are and whither we are tending. And we know what to do and how to do it. There have been countless crises that have come and passed. But if we are not careful, in the midst of our generation's division and turmoil, we will become all one thing, or all the other. May we be people whose love is ***genuine***. Let us be a church remembered not for the ways we fell short but by the many ways we filled those shortcomings with love. Because beloved, we will always fall short. There will always be holes left to fill. But scripture does not ask us to be perfect. It shows us how to live on earth, as it is in heaven.

I want to close today and leave you with words that are not my own, but the words of my dear friend, Joshua, the Pastor in residence at Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church in Memphis, TN. In response to the shooting of Jacob Blake this week, these are his thoughts on love:

*“Sometimes Love looks like being in deliberate and decisive opposition to your oppression. This is the kind of love black folx love this nation with. A love that refuses to let this nation beat us, break us, silence us, degrade us, disappear us, and kill us without consequence or opposition.*

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<sup>7</sup> NBC News, August 25th, 2020.

*Individualism is anathema to love, which is why this country has been so deeply awful at anything that looks like love, whether public or private. Black folx love this country. We love it so much we're willing to fight for it. Until it becomes what it professes to be, a land where freedom and justice reign. And we love ourselves so much, that we refuse to participate in our own suffering.*

*So in the words of scripture: Let us love not in word or speech but in truth and action.”<sup>8</sup>*

Amen

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<sup>8</sup> Joshua Narcisse, (@jhenrynarcisse), “This is the kind of love Black folx love this nation with.” Instagram Photo, August, 26th, 2020.