



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

2 Poland Manor
Poland, Ohio 44514
330-757-1547

August 31, 2014

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Romans 12:9-21

The Rev. Robbin Del Nagro

“Let Love Be Genuine”

How many of you have raised teenagers? How many of you are teenagers? How many of you have young children who are not yet teenagers? Don't despair, your day is coming. Our children, when they are young, instinctively seem to know that we love them. But when they reach that magic age of thirteen or thereabouts suddenly they begin to “act out” in ways that are mostly likely designed to test our love for them. And teens are uncannily good at spotting phonies. During the teen years it is almost as if teens are saying to parents, “How bad can I be and still receive your love? How far can I go and know you still love me? How genuine is your love really?”

At the conclusion of Paul's twenty three imperatives to the church in Rome, he tells them that the culmination of genuine love comes when we show hospitality to the stranger. And what could be stranger than this teen with tri-color hair, a nose ring, and a tattoo just under the knee? You might wonder if it is still the child that you played ball or tea party with just a few short years ago. Does this teen really belong to you? Can you still love and accept him or her as strange as they have become?

In truth, we are surrounded by strangers every where. How do we embrace the strangers who are seated all around us in church or the ones who push their grocery cart next to us at the Giant? In some ways the people who are around us in church are just as strange as those whose names we don't even know. We just think we know each other but we really don't. And deep down inside every one of us has the same question. “Would you still love me if you knew x about me?” It doesn't matter what the x is, how bizarre or how risque – but we all have something that someone else would most likely consider “strange”.

Genuine love is about loving one another no matter what the x is. Genuine love is genuine because it is unconditional. Genuine love doesn't make a lot of judgments. It doesn't weigh the others' attributes. It doesn't love because of what the other does or has or gives to them. Genuine love for one another is a lot like God's love for us. It is rather indiscriminate.

This is a story about a woman names Nancy Sullivan-Geng and it happened when she was in the sixth grade. She had a teacher named Mrs. Lake and from the first

moment Nancy saw her she loved this teacher. Nancy was a good student but she was shy and could have been easily overlooked. Her father was an alcoholic and his drinking had gotten worse as Christmas came closer. At night Nancy lay in bed listening with dread to the pop of beer cans opening. Then she heard a loud slurred voice, her mother's tears, the slamming of doors. This was the terrible secret Nancy kept.

Her father was an attorney and meticulous about polishing his wing tips every morning before work. So for Christmas she took her babysitting money and bought him the best shoeshine kit she could find. She was so excited when he opened the box but watched in silence while he threw it across the living room in an incomprehensible rage, breaking it into pieces. Somehow she thought it wasn't good enough and she was to blame.

But in Mrs. Lake's class Nancy felt safe and protected. She felt appreciated as her tests came back with stars and smiley faces. Gradually her fear of speaking before the class began to subside. Then, at the end of the year the day came for parent-teacher conferences and Mrs. Lake put an alphabetical schedule with a twenty-minute slot for each family on the blackboard. Nancy was puzzled that her name was out of order on the list and came at the end. She knew it wouldn't matter anyway because her parents would not be coming. All of her papers ended up in the trash and letters reminding her parents of the school conference were ignored.

On the day of the parent-student conferences every name was called and each child left the room with their parents until Nancy was the only child left in the classroom. Mrs. Lake opened the door and motioned for Nancy to join her. There were three empty chairs set up in the hallway in front of a desk with Mrs. Lake's grade book. She gestured for Nancy to sit on one of the chairs. Then she said, "First of all, I want you to know how much I love you. Secondly," she said, "you need to know that it is not your fault that your parents are not here today. It was the first time someone had said such things to Nancy and for a moment she was scared that someone knew her secret. Then she realized that Mrs. Lake had always known. She went on, "You deserve a conference whether your parents are here or not. You deserve to know how well I think you're doing." She told Nancy how well she did, pointed out her strengths and showed her test scores. Then she gave her a hug. And for the first time Nancy knew she was genuinely loved.

Genuine love sees beyond the secrets we keep from one another. Genuine love knows that we all have different crosses to bear. We may have been born different in some way. We may have been born into a family that didn't know how to love. We may have spent years of our lives squandering the love we were given. Whatever our situation, we are worthy of love. This community is the place where we should be able to experience it.

Without genuine love, a sacred community like ours does not even sustain itself, much less grow. Studies of church growth have shown that one of the most compelling reasons new members join a church is because of the love and good will they see exhibited between the members. If there is strife it is evident in the atmosphere as soon

as newcomers walk in the door. Not only are they not greeted warmly, but the members don't even speak to each other. And when the service is over everyone walks out alone, silently.

Last Sunday we had visitors with us from the Stephen Foster chorus. One of those chorus members told me on his way out that they visit different churches all through the year and that this was the friendliest church they had visited all year. That is because you know how to welcome the stranger. It is one thing, however, to welcome the stranger that looks just like you, but how well do we welcome the stranger that is very different? How well do we welcome the stranger that is unkept and that we know would never be able to contribute financially? How well do we welcome the stranger of a different race or nationality? How well do we welcome same gender couples, single parents, or those who might not even be Christians but practice some other religion altogether?

Have you ever been a stranger in a different church? Do you know what it is like to walk into a sanctuary filled with people you don't know? Or even to come back to the church after you have not attended for a long time. It's pretty intimidating. You don't know the people around you – there are strange faces and you are not sure how they do things – what to say, when to stand, when to sit. Have you ever been to a country where your white skin was the minority color and people turned and stared at you? Genuine love extends a hand in genuine hospitality to everyone, shows genuine respect for the dignity of every human being.

Genuine love rejoices with those who rejoice, weeps with those who weep, and blesses everyone. Genuine love does not lag in zeal but is ardent in spirit. Genuine love overcomes evil with good. There could be no greater compliment given to this faith community than for others to say of us, “They have genuine love for one another and show hospitality to all.”