

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.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 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.' 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.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Romans 12:9-21

Not The Way I Planned It: Open Wounds

They were the words of a young girl. I read them this week as I was doing my research for today and I just couldn't pass them by. My thoughts lingered with hers, this stranger, the daughter of Debi Thomas, whose essays I read whenever I stumble across them. The girl was looking forward, looking at the web sites of colleges she might attend, looking for insights into what those colleges want in their selection process. And after she had read so many asking the same things, she said, "They want battle scars, not open wounds."

Battle scars; not open wounds. This week, and next, and for the month of June, we'll be considering life—life, not as we planned it, but as it is, as we face, it, as we are challenged and confronted, and thrilled and, yes, disappointed. We'll consider God's role in a life which is less-than-ideal, certainly less than perfect and almost always different than the life we pictured for ourselves as children, as teens, as young marrieds and, even, a year or two ago. My life isn't the way I planned it; I suspect there are others here today who would say the same thing.

The essay I read pointed out the call of the college admissions committees for evidence of determination, of initiative, of barriers overcome and hurdles cleared and opponents defeated.

Burdens carried on the road to success. Achievements, not hopes, or needs, or expectations.
Battle scars—but not open wounds.

These are the stories we love—stories of accomplishment. Stories with a beginning, a middle—not too long—and an end. He saw the girl from a distance. He approached her with caution and spoke a few awkward words, but she smiled and saw beyond his scars and into his heart and, so, said, “Yes,” and **then they lived happily ever after**. We love the stories where the good guy wins, the bad guy repents and the sentimental closing song brings a tear to our eye. Teddy Roosevelt, the sickly child who, by sheer force of will, overcomes his weaknesses to become the **picture** of manhood. Franklin Roosevelt, stricken with polio in the middle of his climb to **fame, hides** his polio and inspires a nation to break the grip of depression and win a world war. Jim Abbott—remember him, born with only **one hand**—persists and insists and perseveres and, against all odds, becomes a successful major league pitcher—even throwing a no-hitter for the Yankees. Problem seen, problem faced, problem solved. That’s what we look for in life. That’s the way we like it.

Let’s pray together.

Wherever two or more are gathered, You have promised to be present. So here we are, and we trust in Your Presence. But we ask something more, Lord. Guide us this day. As we rest our heads against Your breast, as we feel the gentle rocking of Your breathing, as we begin to live in the rhythm of Your heartbeat, help us to understand Your ways and Your will for us. Set our feet upon the path that leads to life, and strengthen us to help others to find that same path and to keep to it. And remind us, we pray, in all that is said and done, all that is seen and heard, everything that is spoken out loud and every thought held in the heart, that the glory of this time and of these words is Yours, alone. Amen.

I thought about it and decided not to. I thought about inviting those who have overcome every hurdle, who have their lives in perfect order, who have not sinned in the last seven or thirty or one-hundred days, to come and to sit in the choir pews up here for this message. But then I counted, and I realized there weren't enough seats for all of you up here. Okay, I'm kidding; I hope you understand.

Let love be genuine. The beginning of our Scripture passage: "Let love be genuine." Other translations use the word sincere, or authentic. Authentic—I think that's the word I like best. Not because it's better than genuine; let love be genuine. **Grandpappy Amos** would probably say genu-ine. Let love be genu-ine. It means the real thing, of course, like a diamond or a Honus Wagner baseball card or a 1953 MG Roadster. Let love be the real thing.

But I remember a woman in seminary. She was married to one of my teachers—he was an ordained minister of a church in Lebanon and she had decided to also become ordained and had just finished her first year when I asked her if she had liked it, and she answered that she felt like she was living more authentically than she ever had. She was connected with her own life—with who she was, who she was meant to be. Authentic—let love be authentic. Let love be at the center of who we really are; let love be connected with our own selves.

If we're honest. That's the name of the song, our centering video. If we're honest. The words promise us this:

Bring your brokenness and I'll bring mine, because love can heal what hurt divides.

And mercy's waiting on the other side, if we're honest.

I wonder if we could play with the words just a little bit; could we say, "If we're authentic," instead of "If We're Honest"? Bring your brokenness, and I'll bring mine; mercy's waiting on the other side—if we're authentic. I think that's good. I don't think we've done any

violence to the meaning of the song, and none to the words that Paul wrote two-thousand years ago in the Greek of his day. Bring your open wounds, and I'll bring mine....

So—let me be the first to be authentic—to be my real self. This isn't the way I planned it. In my life—in our life together, Donna and me--almost nothing is the way I predicted it would be; not when I was ten, or twenty, or thirty, or forty. One thing I thought—one thing I expected—was that I would have it all together at some point. Not that, at age fifty I'd still be trying to figure out who I wanted to be when I grew up, nor that today, at age 61, I'd still be trying to find the “normal” in my daily life.

When I was a teenager, I had bad skin and I was overweight and I was shy. One of these days, I thought. I'm sure my mom said it to me, a million times if she said it once. One of these days, your time will come. You'll look back on this and laugh. Not yet. Not so far, Mom. I still worry about my weight and carry more than I ever did as a teenager, and it's still so hard to talk to people. I went to the dermatologist last year for my first check up and he told me how lucky I was to still have oily skin; lucky me—zits and wrinkles at the same time!

Have all of your wounds healed? Do you have your stuff together? Is it the way you planned it? Do you bear only the scars of the battles you've fought to get where you are today? Or do you still have a wound or two that just won't heal? Do you still struggle with the hurtful things people have said and done? The angry words of your sister or brother, the neglect of your parents, the loneliness for a child who doesn't come around often enough or doesn't take your calls? Being let go from a job you needed; not being accepted for who you are and for what you bring to the table. A financial puzzle whose pieces just won't fit.

Is there unresolved sin in your life? Do you carry the guilt not only of what you have done—in your youth, or years ago, or last week—but of what you did yesterday and what you

will do tomorrow and next week and, unless something changes, for the rest of your life? Are you guilty? Are you ashamed?

I've told you before; I'm a sinner. I wrestle with anger and with arrogance and with a nature for violence and a desire for vengeance. I can't believe the words that come out of my own mouth sometimes. I come before God with the open wounds of my own sin.

Do you come as a sinner, too? Are you broken, like I am?

Now, here's the thing. I don't think it's just me. In fact, I know it isn't just me. My mom told me, on her deathbed, about something that happened when she was just a small child. Then she wondered aloud why she had said it; she told me she had never spoken a word of it before, not even to my dad. An open wound of childhood, first acknowledged—first authentically met—at the age of 65, at the end of her life. And Franklin Roosevelt—even as President of the United States, he carried lots of the slights of his childhood and his youth, and of the remarks of those who knew of his poor health—I've read a lot about him, and about his Cousin Teddy and, let me tell you, both of them may have overcome their challenges, they may have carried plenty of battle scars, but they also had more than their share of open wounds at the same time. They carried open wounds even to their deaths. And neither was very good at being authentic about those wounds.

So, maybe, it's you, too. **Maybe if you're authentic, if you're sincere, if you're honest, you have an open wound or two, also.** Maybe you've overcome everything life has put in your way and have the scars to prove it but, if I were a betting man, I'd bet there's a wound or two that hasn't healed—not yet, anyway. Maybe it's fresh; maybe someone or something hurt you yesterday. Maybe, though, it's a wound that you have carried for a thousand yesterdays, or ten thousand yesterdays—or twenty—ago. But here's the good news, and it is really good news—if

we're honest, sincere, genuine and authentic—then we have come to the right place today. You have come to the right place. We have come to the right place. There is mercy here. Mercy, and grace. There are mercy and grace here, and love. We are offered mercy and grace and love here—and forgiveness. Mercy and grace and love and, yes, forgiveness. Isn't that good news? Isn't that the best news? You don't have to be perfect to come and be with all of us, for we aren't perfect, either; you don't have to have it all together because, if you did, you'd probably be the only one. You'd sit up here, in the choir seats, all by yourself.

You see, Paul was talking to us about how to live together and how to love one another and how to live with and love those who don't see things our way. Even those who aren't able to be authentic. And, in the midst of it all, Paul told us to just be who we are—to love and to be loved:

...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.

Do you notice that Paul doesn't say it's going to be easy? Paul doesn't say there won't be pain, or that only the perfect ones—the ones who have overcome all their problems or, better yet, the ones who never had any problems in the first place—should come to be a part of the church. No, Paul doesn't even invite the perfect ones to sit up front, with him. No, the same applies to everybody. Rejoice in hope but, also, be patient in suffering. Yeah—you're going to suffer; bear with it. Persevere in prayer because—guess what—your prayers may not be answered right away and, when they are, the answer just might be “No.” Those wounds you carry—they might not be healed immediately. That's okay; hold fast to what is good and always, always, always serve the Lord. You may be broken and poor, but give all that you have—all that

you can give—to the needs of the saints and to the strangers who come. There may be people coming around who have it even worse than you, so:

[r]ejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are.

That last phrase—do not claim to be wiser than you are—it also has some other translations, too. Don't overestimate yourself. Don't be conceited. Don't claim to be better off than you are. Don't deny your sins and your sinfulness. In other words, be authentic; be honest about who and what you are. Be genuine. Be genu-ine!

I'm afraid sometimes. I'm afraid that you want—you deserve--a pastor who has his act together. I'm afraid you want somebody up front who has it figured out, who has the answer, who—if he's ever had open wounds, now bears the scars of the battles in which those wounds were won. I worry that you'll see me for who I am and know that I'm a fraud. But then I remember. I remember that you have open wounds, too. I remember that our God welcomes me with mercy, and with grace, and with love and—if I am strong enough to ask—with forgiveness. I come to God just as I am, and it is enough. I am loved. And so are you, loved--open wounds and all. Just as you are. So let us love one another, and let us forgive, too. Just as we are.

I want to close with words from that essay by Debie Thomas, who wrote of her daughter's encounter with the college admission websites, who gave us the insight that the world welcomes our battle scars, but not our open wounds. She concludes her essay this way:

We live in a culture that's drowning in gloss. All around us, people are packaging themselves, marketing themselves, pummeling themselves into forms of prettiness that choke their souls. My guess is this: if Jesus's honest expressions of grief, anger, and fear only drew more people to himself, if even at the apex of his resurrection victory he won a doubter over with open wounds, then maybe we don't need to worry so much about glossy presentation. Maybe Christianity's best appeal is its courage in the face of what scars, rips, and ravages. No, our wounds aren't pretty, and no, they don't tell the whole story. But the stories they do tell

are holy. If Jesus himself didn't fear the bloody and the broken, then perhaps those of us walking in his footsteps don't need to fear them so much, either.

I am broken and bloody, bearing the open wounds of both the world's sharp places and my own sin. But Jesus didn't fear the bloody and the broken; Jesus doesn't fear the bloody and the broken today. Come; He loves us just as we are.

Holy Communion.