



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA
Rev. Carolyn K. Hetrick
The 13th Sunday After Pentecost, August 30, 2020
Sermon Title: Love Grows Amidst the Thorns
Sermon text: Romans 12:9-21

I once had an old rose bush, probably 25 years old, planted in an awkward place right in the middle of the yard with an old trellis that seen better days. That rose bush didn't look like much, with a gnarled and woody stump. After years of hoping, there was nary a rose to be seen on it. I was tired of mowing around it, tired of waiting for something to change, and decided I was to cut it down. I was tired of trying to coax anything good. As I set out to settle scores with this annoyance, a hidden but giant thorn impaled itself, through my garden glove even! There was some screaming to be sure as I pried out that evil thorn. But even when I thought I had gotten it all out, there was a tiny piece that clung in my flesh. Days later, my thumb on my right hand, the one I write and type with, was angry looking and throbbing. Dirt on that embedded itself. It took a lot to get over it and be able to really heal. Laid up in my pain, I cursed that worthless old rose. But when I imagined having to dig to take it out, I became even more miserable. I cursed those who had planted this rose and not cared for it, their foolishness and my predicament. But while I was cooped up from gardening, one day it came to me that maybe that rose needed something.

I had never fed it or loved it. I had treated it like a bother from the "get go." Admittedly looking for a cheap solution, I discovered that planting a banana peel at the base might help it thrive. With my spouse shaking his head at my latest crazy scheme, I decided to give it a shot. I got down on my belly and reached through the thorns, worked pulverized banana peel into the soil. A couple weeks later, this tired old rose began greening up and before long, one morning I spied it- one beautiful pink old fashioned rose.

That rose would never have appeared without uncharacteristic steadfast love albeit through a banana peel. A small thing.

There amidst the thorns, there was new life.

All along, what that rose needed was love.

Love, we hear in so many ways, is the basis and center and expression of Christian life.

But in our increasingly wearied and frenzied lives, and the proliferation of "cancelling" others, too often we become focused upon negating voices, and identities, and even the very lives of anyone who doesn't suit.

We scream it even in our emails, and social media we share far too quickly some days. We have become so demanding like the consumer culture telling us anything can be "on demand."

The opposite of "on demand" is to "Cancel" "Unfriend" and "Delete."

While those early Christians did not have the speed of our technology, rest assured they struggled just as we do with the messiness and thorniness of having to try to actually love one another in community beyond the superficial.

In Romans, Paul spends lots of time impressing upon us that our relationship with God is dependent not on our worthiness but on God's free grace. But that grace does not act in isolation. Instead Paul says that grace grows new life as Christ draws us into a life transformed- loving community.

Using love as a basis and center of Christian living, he encourages us to cultivate love as a virtue for both social and holy life. Genuine love, is not a one-time achievement, but a sought-after virtue enacted through daily practice and prayer. It is a cultivated practice. That love does not get lived out in perfect environments, but is given birth, meaning, and essence in times when people are in conflict with each other. These verses encourage us to love in times of conflict, disagreements as part of our Christian identity.

I don't have to elaborate for you to envision the struggle and even source of suffering that can be. Nowhere do we see this more clearly than in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Christ. In the thorniness of walking among those who wanted nothing more than to end his life, and those whose lives were so broken, only God could save them, Jesus brought love and new life. Even when the thorns became a crown and a cross, he never gave up on us and his mission to overcome evil and the power of death. With his last breath he spoke forgiveness- love, not hate, got the last word.

This love, that grows amidst the thorns is the model for our life.

The longer I garden the more I see it takes looking at the landscape and learning how to look for and coax out life. I learn, grow, and sometimes discover I need to relearn, It's true of my garden. And it is true of growing among others in this life.

Thorns will exist- there is no denying them, but awareness of the evil “out there” should prompt us toward a renewed look within ourselves, instead of imagining an invitation to engage in a culture war with our “enemies.” Love bids us to seek that integrity within ourselves that becomes our witness for Christ in a troubled world.

If all I ever imagined was thorns, I would never even bother with the rose. I garden because I know roses come, even as I still get pricked by thorns. Do you only expect thorns, or do you look for the roses?

God wants us to grow.

One thing I know- Never once have I grown anything through spite.

This I also know- sometimes my heart has been touched by the gifts I did not plant, but God brought forth. And people have tended me when I would never have asked, but desperately needed it.

This Love saves. This love calls us to revive the world around us.

Paul encourages us to cultivate godly love for and in all people.

A revival of this love and unity is urgently needed today. This love is not an emotional one, but one that comes from the transforming and spiritual rebirth of our minds, souls, and hearts. It is a practical love in that it is experienced by both us and others; a love lived out in ways that always cherishes others. ¹

This love seeks justice, forgiveness, reconciliation, and peace. It calls us away from vengeance, which is just a form of self-medication, into patience with God’s healing.

In our lives, Paul encourages us to bless- and keep blessing. Rejoice-and keep rejoicing. Hold fast- and keep holding. Contribute- and keep contributing. Extend- and keep extending.

Love-and keep loving, even when, in our world, time more than a nanosecond feels too long, and struggle is not in our wheelhouse.

This life is draining.

We come to worship to be fed, not unlike that tired rose.

Fed again so we can grow by a God whose supply of steadfast love for us never runs out.

Who calls us to steadfast love, in faith, even when we cannot see- to the work of the long haul, not just a moment.

Friends, this call to love is love in hope, because of the steadfast love manifested in the person and work of Jesus Christ who empowers our loving.

Be assured, our collective survival will find its fullest flowering in Him.

¹ Israel Kamudzandu, “Working Preacher”