

“The Dogs of Santo Domingo Can Sniff Out Love”

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

10 September 2023

Rev. Paulo Gustavo França

Text: Romans 13:8-12

“Love does no wrong to a neighbour”

~ Romans 13:10

Prayer

Spirit of the Living God

Fall afresh on us this morning.

May the words of my mouth

And the meditation of our hearts

Bring us closer to one another through the love of Christ. Amen.

Friends, welcome to our Rally Sunday service! If you are our guest today either in-person or online, I am grateful that you have chosen to spend part of your Sunday worshipping God here at Acton Congregational Church.

In case you have not heard, today, for the first time ever, I am delivering a 5-minute sermon on a Sunday morning. During the live auction at the fundraiser for our youth mission trips, Ginny Kremer placed the highest bid on this brief meditation. And I couldn't think of a better day to honor Ginny's winning bid than the Sunday after Labor Day when we are easing ourselves into the rhythm of a new school calendar and the demands of our work schedules.

Rally Sunday is a good day for a 5-minute sermon, but the Apostle Paul's words to the Romans do not fit easily into a sermonette. Love is at the heart of the Christian faith. And in today's reading, Paul helps us to understand that in the Christian tradition love is not a warm, fuzzy feeling that gives butterflies in your stomach. It is not the sentiment made popular by the saying ***“love is a feeling you feel when you feel that you're going to feel a feeling that you've never felt before.”*** No! Love in our tradition is a commitment to the physical, emotional, economic, social, and spiritual wellbeing of our neighbors. Author Madeleine L'Engle captured what Paul was saying to the Romans in a reflection where she wrote: ***“Love can't be pinned down by a definition... I am slowly coming to understand with my heart as well as with my head that love is not a feeling. It is a person.”***¹ This is why Paul said, ***“Love does no wrong to a neighbor.”***

But here's a confession: love can be a rather repetitive, banal and boring topic for a sermon. As a good friend of mine often says: what else is there to say about love except that it is a great idea?

Sermons are meant to be preached and, therefore, all sermons are prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation rather than on proper grammar and punctuation required of written documents.

This past week, while I agonized over this 5-minute sermon – I won't tell you how many times I used the word-count feature in Word – the lyrics of one of Tina Turner's greatest hits kept popping into my head.

***"...what's love got to do, got to do with it?
What's love, but a second-hand emotion?"²***

That's an important question for us this morning. What's love got to do with Rally Sunday and with a new church program year?

While I was pondering this question myself, I thought about the mission trip I took to the Dominican Republic with the youth group from a previous church. One day, we visited the colonial district of Santo Domingo. As soon as we arrived at Parque Colón, a few stray dogs started following us. The kids began to play with them almost instantly. Our guide said that the stray dogs in the colonial zone learned to recognize tourists. They know that tourists usually do not kick or shoo them away. The dogs also learned that if they hung around, they might be rewarded with food. I myself bought 5 burgers for the dog that persisted and followed me all the way back to our van.

Somehow, those stray dogs developed the ability to sniff out not just tourists, but especially kindness and love.

I wonder how many people can feel, sense, perceive, and more importantly experience love – real, genuine Christian love – when they attend our services and get involved in our congregation.

Friends, love has everything to do with what you and I do here at Acton Congregational Church. I hope you can feel God's love in this place. I pray that you can sniff out love and kindness in this church. I hope we can be known as a church that owes no one anything, but that is committed to loving our neighbors. And I am not talking about loving people in a conceptual, broad and abstract fashion, but in a personal way. I am talking about a commitment to walk with people, hang out with each other, and make sure that in our congregation love and kindness are never perceived as second-hand emotions.

Love has gotten everything to do with our church! And on this Rally Sunday, I am going to ask you to do something. This is about to become an interactive sermon. Place your hand over your heart and close your eyes. Now, think of a very specific moment when you felt God's love in this congregation. Think of an experience you had at ACC that lifted you up because you were accepted and loved as a full person.

Open your eyes. I hope you felt your heart being filled with real love all over again.

Friends, we can make love and kindness be the reason why people want to be part of ACC. I invite you to wake from sleep, from spiritual apathy and dare to love each other

fully, bravely, and fiercely in this new program year. Let us make a commitment today to be the kind of church where people can sniff out God's love for humankind.

And Ginny, I think this is as close as I can get to a 5-minute sermon!

¹ Madeleine L'Engle in Glimpses of Grace, p. 197.

² "What's love got to do, got to do with it?" Written by Graham Lyle and Terry Britten, released in 1984.