

## **If it is Possible...**

Sermon 70 | Greystone Baptist Church | August 30, 2020  
Romans 12: 9 -21

One of the best-selling books of all time is a children's novel written in 1908 by Lucy Maud Montgomery. *Anne of Green Gables* has been translated into 36 different languages and sold more than 50 million copies worldwide. The popular novel has also been shown on theatre stages and on the big screen; there continue to be annual live productions of it in Japan and Europe; and the real proof that this is a great story is the success of its popular Netflix series called *Anne with an E*.

If we have learned one thing during this pandemic, it is the value of a binge-worthy Netflix series.

Justin and I are not immune from this COVID trend. Each night after Mia is asleep and our final work obligations are completed, we grab our evening snacks (popcorn for me, dry cereal for him) and we watch "Anne."

The story is set in Canada on Prince Edward Island, in a small farming town called Avonlea. The main character, Anne Shirley, is an orphan girl who was mistakenly adopted by Matthew and Marilla Cuthbert, two middle-aged siblings, living together on their family farm, and intending to adopt a young boy to help them with the demands of that farm.

The accidental adoption is just the first of an unending series of unfortunate events and misunderstandings that characterize Anne's whole life. Episode after episode is packed with one thing after another that Anne accidentally messes up or unintentionally gets herself into - largely due to her unconventional upbringing in the orphanage and her innate sense of right and wrong. Much to the dismay of the upstanding citizens of Avonlea, Anne often transgresses contemporary social norms and purity standards for the sake of justice, kindness, and compassion for those whom society has overlooked.

One example of this is when Anne meets a Native American girl who appears to be about her age. The two strike up an instant friendship as their curiosity leads them to ask questions and learn about one another. After spending some time in the Native American village, both girls recognize that they need to help prepare supper. Before they part ways, they decide to make a trade. Anne gives Ka'kwet the scarf she is wearing and Ka'kwet gives Anne the strands of leather that are woven throughout her braids. After accepting the gift and inviting her new friend to braid the strands into her long red braids, Anne wants to see what she looks like:

*Do you have a mirror?* she asks.

"What's a mirror?" her friend replies.

*I want to see myself,* Anne says.

"Ahh ok! Come with me" Ka'kwet replies.

The two run to the river where they lean over to see their reflections. Looking at the water, Anne says, "It's funny how people are so quick to point out differences, when there are so many ways we're all alike."

Despite many cultural differences and a social code that demanded the two girls remain strangers, they created a bond that day, one that would soon be tested in some very disturbing ways. In a world where propriety and sameness were the highest of virtues, their friendship pushed the limits of possibility for acceptance, kindness, and compassion.

Although these two young girls may be fictional characters, their bold and courageous friendship echoes a very real call to us and to all Christians to be people who push the limits of possibility when it comes to showing Christ's love.

In the first century, when Nero was emperor of Rome, Paul wrote to the Gentile Christians about the Jewish Christians who were returning from exile, most likely due to Nero's reversal of his predecessor's edict which forced them to leave. Those Jewish Christians, like Prisca and Aquila (whose names you may recognize from the book of Acts) had been forced out of Rome by the emperor Claudius and with this political move, they and others like them lost property and community ties during their exile. Now, they're allowed to come back and they are learning how to live with the Gentile Christians who've been growing in community all this time.

No doubt there were some stereotypes, misconceptions, and hurt feelings popping up within this merging fellowship. Perhaps there was even anger or bitterness about the way their history had unfolded. I'm sure there were some who insisted that the trauma of exile never be forgotten – and still others who wanted to embrace the new reality and move on, without looking back. You can imagine the dynamic emerging there.

So into this contentious context Paul writes the words we find in the scripture reading for today:

*Let love be genuine*

In the original Greek the word for genuine literally means "un-hypocritical," and there is no verb so most translators understand "to be" as the implied verb. More simply put, the opening line to today's reading "Let love be genuine" could also be translated, "genuine love is:" or "unhypocritical love is:" what follows would then describe this genuine or un-hypocritical love.

The list in Romans sounds a lot like the more famous list in 1Corinthians 13. Both lists set out to describe a culture of love that should be first understood and practiced within the faith communities. In other words, these lists which call us to abhor evil and cling to what is good, to be affectionate and kind to one another, to honor one another with and to be "afire in the Spirit" (I love that line!)... we're called to rejoice in hope together and persevere in affliction together, to devote ourselves in prayer for and with one another and to always extend hospitality to strangers. This is what authentic, genuine, un-hypocritical Christian love looks like.

As the letter to the Romans goes on we discover that this practice of genuine love is to be first employed in the churches and then it should inform our whole lives. In other words, we (like the Jew and Gentile Christians living in ancient Rome) are supposed to learn how to love one another un-hypocritically at church, and then take that same love into the world.

Of course, truly modeling this kind of love within the context of ancient Rome could have jeopardized someone's social status because it meant living differently. Rather than going along with the status quo and seeking after the rewards of the empire, Christians were to prioritize love – un-hypocritical love.

You know, it's interesting, we've had these ancient words with us for nearly two thousand years and yet looking back through Christian history, it seems like we are having a difficult time figuring this one out. These ideals for Christian living that Paul puts forth in multiple epistles seem to be out the window when we consider the strife, the discord, the division, and sometimes the outright violent positions the church has taken in the name of piety and righteousness.

We have justified inquisitions, displaced indigenous peoples, stolen land, imprisoned saints, supported slavery, silenced and subjugated women, and refused to love our neighbors who are different from us... or simply difficult to place within our limited world-views. Often, in these moments of misunderstanding, prophets from the margins challenge and provoke us to reconsider Jesus' message and recognize the error in our ways.

Anne of Green Gables certainly does this by befriending Ka'kwet, while everyone around her, including the priest, insisted on calling her (and all Native Americans) "savage" and "heathen". Anne's commitment to showing love and compassion for Ka'kwet led her to take some very bold and courageous steps as the storyline progresses, some of which risk not only her reputation but also her life.

As extraordinary as this example is, it is just one of many, many times when Anne of Green Gables risks her own security and acceptance on behalf of someone else. Her gestures of love start small. Her small acts of kindness, though they make her different from everyone else, prove her to be a person of integrity and compassion. Her friends soon learn that they can depend on her to be there for them when they are broken or alone.

Anne's unconventional kindness, grows and spreads throughout Avonlea and eventually begins to change the hearts and minds of once closed-minded townspeople. Ironically, as in the case with Ka'kwet, the church of Avonlea is often one of the last places where this loving-kindness is accepted.

Although the church of Avonlea and those who live within it are all fictional characters, the stories remind me of Galilee and Jesus who, through small acts of kindness and an unwavering commitment to unconditional love, changed the course of history, against all odds.

It makes me wonder what kind of people and what kind of church we are becoming?

Are we like the religious institutions that Jesus encountered which insisted on upholding the status quo?

Are we like the members of the church in Rome in which Christians couldn't love one another beyond the boundaries of ethnicity?

Are we just like the church and the townspeople of Avonlea who allowed their commitments to contemporary social norms and fear of anything else prevent them from seeing the opportunities to display the love of Christ to one another until an orphan girl with long red braids came into their lives and showed them all the possibilities that were before them?

In verse 18, Paul's descriptive list of what genuine love looks like is interrupted by these words: "If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."

"If it is possible," he writes...

So many of the problems that face our world today seem enormous and insurmountable. 400 years of racism and the resulting anger pouring out in the streets of many cities since May of this year. 10.2 % of the U.S. population facing unemployment. 6 months of crisis due to the Coronavirus pandemic and no sign of relief. Two hurricanes threatening the Gulf Coast. Two political parties who seem to exist only to tear one another apart; an upcoming national election that will likely be as divisive as the last... school children and teachers making impossible decisions and trying to learn remotely because there really is no other safe option... and churches that too often remain silent and unchanged by all of this because we do not believe that love could possibly make a difference.

The challenges seem too big.

I wonder if we might learn a little bit from the fictional character of Anne of Greene Gables, or from the very real person, Jesus of Nazareth who both believed anything was possible and committed their lives to living out genuine and un-hypocritical love in each and every moment. We could start small and practice within our own church, looking for those who are suffering, seeking out those who are hurting, finding those who might not have found a place to fit in quite yet... and through practice, I wonder if we might begin to train ourselves in the ways of love so that overtime we can see possibilities we might not have seen before?

If we could learn how to see with the eyes of Christ, learn how to listen with the ears of Christ, maybe we could learn how to live with the love of Christ and maybe... just maybe... that love would start small, perhaps in the small community of Greystone Baptist, and maybe it is possible that this love, this genuine, un-hypocritical love could grow into something bigger than we ever could have imagined.

The little red-haired orphan, Anne Shirley-Cuthbert, never imagined her life would have any kind of impact. But her life and commitment to love changed Avonlea for the better – in ways both small and large.

Anne believed love was always possible.

So I wonder today, if we also believe that genuine love is possible?

And if it is possible... so far as it depends on us... will we let it begin with us?