**Love’s Labor’s Lost**

**First Presbyterian Church**

**Pittsford, NY 14534**

**September 3rd, 2017**

1. I hope you are thoroughly enjoying your Labor Day weekend.
   1. The Mitchells have had a built-in celebration for the past ten Labor Day weekends because tomorrow is Wes’ birthday.
      1. Although Wes was not actually born on Labor Day that year, one could argue that any day a baby is born is Labor Day.
   2. Labor Day first became on official federal holiday in 1884 and was designed to honor the contributions that workers have made to the strength, prosperity, [laws](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_labor_law) and well-being of the country.
      1. More recently, we may have associated Labor Day with celebrating the things we love to do during summer – like the last BBQ, the last swim, the last day at Seabreeze, or the last late sleep in.
      2. I would encourage us to combine these understandings into a celebration and honoring of each of our contributions to our communal life.
   3. If you were trying to figure out today’s sermon title, it references one of William Shakespeare’s early comedies.
      1. The play follows the King of [Navarre](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Navarre) (Pamplona, Spain) and his three companions as they attempt to forswear the company of women for three years of study and fasting, and their subsequent infatuation with the Princess of [France](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/France) and her ladies.
      2. In an untraditional ending for a comedy, the play closes with the death of the Princess's father, and all weddings are delayed for a year.
      3. Shakespeare grapples with the theme of love and what labor we must apply to achieve it.
      4. Shakespeare has one of the principal characters say, “the only study worthy of humanity is that of love.”
         1. Wise words…
2. Our labor this fall is the study of love.
   1. Indeed, we labor to study love each day of our lives.
   2. But this fall, our study is particularly important because our congregation is embarking on a notable change – the retirement of Pastor Bruce.
   3. Change is an inevitable fact of life.
      1. Maya Angelou says, “Stepping onto a brand new path is difficult but not more difficult than remaining in a situation, which is not nurturing to the whole person.”
      2. Einstein says, “The world as we have created it is a process of our thinking. It cannot be changed without changing our thinking.”
      3. Given Angelou’s and Einstein’s wisdom, let us embark this fall on our labor of studying love.
         1. Let us do so with the confidence that God’s steadfast love continues to guide us.
            1. One of the best ways God guides us is through Scripture.
            2. Paul’s masterful treatise to the Romans reaches a pivot point in Chapter 12.

Paul begins by exhorting us not to be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of our minds.

Today’s lectionary reading from Chapter 12 contains verses many of us have heard at weddings.

* + - * 1. In fact, I used them for two weddings I officiated this summer.

Both weddings took place on holy ground.

It seems obvious that a church would be holy ground.

But as Moses discovered when he passed a random bush, wherever God is, and God is certainly present at weddings, is holy ground.

* + - * 1. Both weddings taking place on holy ground were designed with the same goal in mind.

Both brides and grooms wanted to rehearse from the beginning of their married lives together the attributes of genuine love.

* 1. Consider a translation slightly different from what appears in our pew bibles and what I read for us a moment ago.
     1. Genuine love – that is love that is not hypocritical – is the topic of verses 9-13.
        1. Verse 9 has no verb in Greek and so most people have assumed the passage should begin with the imperative, “Let love be genuine.”
           1. Imperatives can be harsh.

Do this.

Don’t do that.

* + - 1. We could also translate the opening verse as “Genuine love is…”
         1. What a difference that set up makes!
         2. It whets our appetite.
         3. It makes us curious.

Genuine love is…

Da, da, da…fade to black…

What IS genuine love?

* 1. Mr. James Dillingham Young ("Jim") and his wife, Della, are a couple living in a modest apartment in NYC in the early 1900s.
     1. They have only two possessions between them in which they take pride: Della's beautiful long, flowing hair, almost touching to her knees, and Jim's shiny gold watch, which had belonged to his father and grandfather.
     2. On [Christmas Eve](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christmas_Eve), with only $1.87 in hand, and desperate to find a gift for Jim, Della sells her hair for $20 to a nearby hairdresser and eventually finds a [platinum](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Platinum) [pocket watch](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pocket_watch) fob chain for Jim's watch for $21.
     3. Satisfied with the perfect gift for Jim, Della runs home and begins to prepare dinner.
     4. At 7 o'clock, Della sits at a table near the door, waiting for Jim to come home.
     5. Unusually late, Jim walks in and immediately stops short at the sight of Della, who had previously prayed that she was still pretty to Jim.
     6. Della then admits to Jim that she sold her hair to buy him his present.
     7. Jim gives Della her present – an assortment of combs, useless now that her hair is short.
     8. Della then shows Jim the chain she bought for him, to which Jim says he sold his watch to get the money to buy her combs.
     9. Although Jim and Della are now left with gifts that neither one can use, they realize how far they are willing to go to show their love for each other, and how genuine and generous their love really is.
     10. O’Henry’s famous story, “the Gift of the Magi”, ends with the narrator comparing the pair's mutually sacrificial gifts of love with those of the Biblical Magi.
         1. Genuine love is generous.
  2. In Romans 12, Paul gives us 12 clear instructions about what genuine love is and how we can practice it.
     + 1. Genuine love is…
          1. Abhorring the evil
          2. Clinging to the good
          3. Being affectionate to one another in mutual love
          4. Outdoing one another in honor
          5. Not lagging in zeal and ardor
          6. Being afire in the spirit
          7. Serving the Lord
          8. Rejoicing in hope
          9. Persevering in affliction
          10. Being devoted to prayer
          11. Contributing to the needs of the saints, and
          12. Pursuing hospitality
       2. Churches are practice fields for living the covenant of love Paul describes here.
          1. What we practice here, we can share with the world in our day to day interactions.
          2. Our practices in day to day interactions help us courageously face the future – a future inevitably containing change – without a debilitating level of fear.

1. Courage is a gift from God.
   1. Courage is a combination of all the loving practices Paul lines out for us in Romans 12.
   2. Courage is not the absence of fear, but the willingness to practice genuine love in the face of fear.
   3. Courage is strengthened and reinforced communally.
   4. Courage can be taught.
   5. Courage can also be caught.
   6. Courage, my friends, is what we are called to share over the course of the change we are entering this fall.
   7. Courage is grounded in an affirmation of the promise that God is with us – Emmanuel – no matter where we are or in what state of change we are.
      1. A newly minted pastor arrived at a congregation.
      2. This green pastor decided the congregation had been doing a number of things wrong – including placing the candles too close together on the communion table.
      3. The pastor unilaterally decided to move them one Sunday.
      4. With that rigidity of thinking, the pastor reacted in several other situations and within a year found himself asked to leave by the congregation.
      5. Ten years later, that same pastor happened to be in the sanctuary for a funeral of a friend and noticed that the candles were placed where the pastor had wanted them.
      6. After the service, the pastor approached the current pastor of the church and asked how the candles had been moved to that place.
      7. The new pastor said, “it was simple. I listened to the congregation, genuinely loved them, and moved the candles an inch each year.”
   8. Genuine love is the love we learn about in Scripture.
      1. Genuine love listens to God’s voice in prayer and to the beloved community’s voice in day to day interactions.
      2. Genuine love is strengthened communally.
      3. Genuine love is reinforced by our practices such as rehearsing the banquet God prepares for each one of us.
         1. This table is a table where we rehearse, practice and remember God’s genuine love in gracious form.
         2. Rehearsing or practicing makes us stronger when we face a situation requiring our skill and our courage.
         3. Remembering those times when we have done so gives us courage to be courageous again.
            1. This is why ritual is so important.
            2. Rituals remind us of God’s genuine love.
   9. When we remember God’s grace at the table, we are also able to remember other times when we have faced change, faced our fears and overcome them.
      1. Think about this congregation’s response to the Ascension Thursday, 2004 lightning strike and fire that destroyed the sanctuary and rendered unusable our education and music wings.
      2. That very night, we gathered in support of one another and praised God that nobody was hurt.
      3. While the sanctuary was still smoldering, elders gathered to make a plan for where we would worship that very Sunday.
         1. At Mendon HS, we sang together, ‘I am the church, you are the church, we are the church together.’
      4. As the body of Christ, we courageously collaborated and found a way to faithfully continue God’s mission in the village, the nation, and the world.
      5. God’s genuine love was in ample evidence as we each individually practiced together those day to day interactions that make for courageous living.
   10. Mother Teresa said, “I alone cannot change the world, but I can cast a stone across the waters to create many ripples.”
2. Shakespeare’s characters in Love’s Labor’s Lost were misguidedly seeking to improve their understanding of love by abstaining from its more seductive physical form.
   1. They succeeded only in losing that for which they labored.
   2. I would encourage us this fall to find the fruit of love’s labor.
   3. Let us find the fruit of genuine love by
      1. Abhorring the evil
      2. Clinging to the good
      3. Being affectionate to one another in mutual love
      4. Outdoing one another in honor
      5. Not lagging in zeal and ardor
      6. Being afire in the spirit
      7. Serving the Lord
      8. Rejoicing in hope
      9. Persevering in affliction
      10. Being devoted to prayer
      11. Contributing to the needs of the saints, and
      12. Pursuing hospitality
3. Let us rehearse finding love’s labor fulfilled when we remember God’s love for us right here at the table. Amen.