Sunday, August 31, 2014: Romans 12:9-21

While this is not the exuberant rhetorical surplus we find in 1 Corinthians 13, love is still Paul's guiding principle.

by Luke A. Powery in the August 20, 2014 issue

About a decade ago, I met a man at an Episcopal Church in Atlanta. His name was Clackston, but I didn't know that at first. I approached to greet him and asked him his name. He said, "Get out of here! Get out of here!"

I was taken by surprise by this unusual greeting; I knew this wasn't normal protocol for Episcopalians. But then someone told me about Clackston's journey. He always greeted people that way, because he had come to believe that "Get out of here!" was his name. After all, that's what everybody always said to him.

It was as if Clackston had internalized the lack of welcome he received throughout his life. He began to believe that his first name was "Get Out" and his last name was "Of Here." I learned further that he was dealing with mental health issues—while also finding that his struggles led others to deem him nonhuman.

My initial encounter with Clackston was uncomfortable, but it was appropriate that I met him on church grounds. Isn't the church supposed to be an oasis of hospitality and a spiritual hospital for the sick? Arthur Sutherland writes that "hospitality is the practice by which the church stands and falls." That Episcopal parish in Atlanta stood tall as it welcomed Clackston into its community. There should be no need for congregations to make outdoor signs that say "We are a welcoming church," because the church should be known as a womb of warm welcome for anybody.

Obviously, this is not always the case. Christians need to be reminded of fundamentals like the practice of love and hospitality.

After affirming each body and the one body of Christ, the apostle Paul reminds the church at Rome how to live in community inside and outside the church. He is very

explicit about the embodied Christian ethic required in light of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul's theology is grounded in communal and social ethical practice, and he frames his ethical imperatives with love. "Let love be genuine," he says. This is not the exuberant rhetorical surplus we find in 1 Corinthians 13, but love is still Paul's guiding principle for life in community. We are to live by the command to love: "Love one another with mutual affection."

It is not a mere suggestion. Paul makes this clear with his staccato imperatives: hold fast, love, be ardent, serve, rejoice, persevere, contribute, extend, bless, and so on. There is no wiggle room in determining what he means by his words. Like a fireball preacher, Paul is making it plain even as he draws on scriptural tradition. It is clear that what Paul teaches is pertinent to the church's relations not just internally but also externally. There is congruity between the two, just as there is only one body, and it cannot be divided.

That's why Paul can say both "contribute to the needs of the saints" and "extend hospitality to strangers." Saints and strangers alike should receive genuine love, because hospitality does not discriminate. In the current debates about immigration, Paul's injunction to welcome strangers is particularly apropos. He does not promote fear of the unknown. He even seems unfazed by the presence of evil.

Paul's teaching theme is risky: "Hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good. . . . Do not repay anyone evil for evil. . . . Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." His letter arrives in an atmosphere of threat and intimidation toward believers. Paul is not naive about such persecution, yet he calls for a risky and humble hospitality. This is a pastoral approach, a stance of humility. But it is also risky, because such hospitable love opens oneself up to the possibility of hostility. Doing good toward another does not mean this person will respond with good toward you.

Yet etymologically, *hostility* is built right into the word *hospitality*. Hospitality is inherently risky, because it contains its opposite within it. According to philosopher Jacques Derrida, hospitality says "Let the other come!"—whoever or whatever that other is. A person who welcomes may end up with wounds.

Brother Roger, the founder of the Taizé Community in France, lived this. The Taizé Community is an ecumenical community founded after World War II as a sign of reconciliation between divided people. Every year it welcomes thousands of guests

who seek silence, prayer, peace, and community. During one of Taizé's common prayer services in 2005, Brother Roger—who was 90 years old—was fatally stabbed by a woman who the community knew to be struggling with mental health issues. Brother Roger's hospitality welcomed the risk of hostility. His hospitality literally killed him.

Individuals and communities are made vulnerable by being hospitable. Paul knows this, yet the service of Christ requires hospitality anyway. Jesus died because of hospitality, and we may die too—but in that dying, evil will be overcome with good.