

**Message: “Love without Pretending”**

**“If it’s too good to be true, there must be a catch.”**

You know this expression. Grace is the one thing with no catch, because it makes good things happen. As those who follow Jesus, offering grace, we feel like we do a pretty good job. But this isn’t always true.

**I’m going to do something unusual today** and share with you an experience from my district role. I serve as project manager and adviser to our District Superintendent and District Union, the board of trustees. So, I’m on call for all sorts of situations, like one church this week.

**The congregation stopped meeting** at the end of 2025, and the campus has been vacant since the end of June. A month ago, we boarded it up. On Wednesday, there was a major break-in. The intruders were looking for copper. All fixtures were pulled out, electrical panels stripped, drawers and cabinets opened. No power means no security system or fire alarm. They broke open a door into the chapel. They pried open the parsonage garage and camped out. We’re pretty sure we’ve seen them.

**Saturday morning, it was cold.** We think someone got in and started a fire to get warm. Sadly, the chapel caught fire and burned down. The fire department brought cadaver dogs in the morning to make sure no one died. Thankfully, no one did. I wish I could say the situation is stable and secure, but it’s not. Life happens in the interruptions.

**We feel the pain of the former members and pastors.** We feel the pain of the neighbors, who experienced disruption. And we feel the pain of the people who are desperate and will do anything to try to survive.  
*Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayers.*

**People face trials and challenges we can’t imagine.**

They need Jesus for refuge, provision, help and comfort. I think they need to truly experience God’s grace and mercy. Hurting people aren’t looking for us to hold back, even when empathy is hard. I hope you can find compassion and love helping you through your day.

**We all have neighbors who want to be welcomed** and made to feel like there’s a place where they belong, a community and space where they’re safe and can experience real love. Sadly, the church is often more willing to judge than offer meaningful care.

**Real love isn't a performance we put on for friends and neighbors.**

It's a costly gift we pour out for them. Paul wrote, "*Love without pretending. Detest evil and hold on to what is good. Love each other like the members of your family*" (Romans 12:9).

**This says a lot about real love** and our part in receiving and sharing it. After all, we all have "that person" in our family. At times we can't stand them, but we love them anyway. This is a good way to look at people in general. We're all God's children.

**Genuine, authentic love isn't just emotion or sentiment.**

It embraces the spiritual, conscious and material aspects of a person. Love connects with us in the deepest places in our being and reaches out to those around us. And love can lift us to heaven.

**There's also no falseness, no fake news, no hypocrisy in real love.**

*Hypokrites*, the Greek word for hypocrite, originally referred to a stage actor who wore a painted mask to play a part, changing characters by changing the mask. Now, we all wear masks. And we can find ourselves pretending to be something we aren't. We aren't perfect. We can't love unconditionally. We can't ride in, save the day and leave everyone wondering, "Who was that masked wonder?"

**Pretending to love is wearing a relational mask.** On the "stage" of church or social gatherings, the mask smiles, nods and says the right words. But behind the scenes, when the curtain closes, the mask comes off, revealing indifference or bitterness. Real love discards the mask because it doesn't need to act out a part.

**We may find ourselves putting on a mask before we get to church.**

We've learned how to smile, use the right words, nod at the right time, while hiding our hurt, apathy or exhaustion. I'm not pointing fingers or trying to make you feel bad. It's part of our human nature.

**We often prefer the appearance of love, because real love comes with a cost.** Social media is only the online version of what we've all learned already. We spend a lot of time curating our image, focusing on how we look, dress, what we say, who we know, that kind of thing. We can look nice, be welcoming and seem holy without doing the hard inner work of actually caring for someone.

**In the ancient Roman marketplace**, dishonest merchants would take cheap, cracked pottery and fill the cracks with dark wax to hide the flaws. When held up to the sunlight, the cracks showed through. High-quality pottery was sold marked *sine cera*, meaning “without wax.”

**This is where our English word *sincere* comes from.**

Cheap love is pottery filled with wax. It looks solid and flawless on the outside, but the heat of pressure or the light of truth exposes the cracks. God calls us to a *sine cera* love, a love with nothing to hide and no deceptive filler.

**This reminds me of Asaph’s reference to Jacob and Israel in his psalm.** Jacob means “deceiver” while Israel means “one who struggles with God.” They’re the same person. Jacob and his brother Esau struggled, just as their parents did. Their relationship was difficult. It took many years for them to reconcile and come together.

**We may try to fill our relational cracks with smooth words**, but the heat of crisis always melts away the filler. After all, if our love depends on an audience, it isn’t love. It’s marketing.

**This begs the question: what is genuine love?**

Genuine love isn’t passive, spineless or merely “polite.” It has an edge. Genuine love hates what destroys people and holds fast to what builds them up. Cheap love is nice to your face but stays silent when you are destroying yourself.

**What destroys us?** Things like gossip, abuse, neglect, sin and self-deception. They have a common source: pride. Our ego will lead us down a false path. Asaph and Jesus tell us about the things which lead us away from God’s love. That’s the way to true death.

**Paul warns us too**, “*Brothers and sisters, you were called to freedom. Only don’t let this freedom be an opportunity to indulge your selfish impulses but serve each other through love. All the Law has been fulfilled in a single statement: Love your neighbor as yourself. But if you bite and devour each other, be careful you don’t get eaten up by each other!*” (Galatians 5:13-15). Seems like there’s a whole lot of biting and devouring going on today, when we need more loving and reconciling.

**And pretending to love is exhausting for us and empty for the people around us.** It's like walking into a home and seeing a beautiful bowl of fruit on the table. It looks vibrant, ripe and delicious. But when you reach out to take a piece, you only find hard, hollow plastic. It was only there for decoration, not for nourishment.

**Pretending affection only offers the appearance of love.** It looks and sounds nice, but when someone comes looking for actual comfort, support or help in a time of real need, there's nothing to receive. Genuine love feeds people.

**Why do we settle for false fruit when we starve for the real thing,** the fruit of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control? Genuine love cares too much about your soul to flirt with what destroys your life. I don't know about you, but I'd rather invest the time and energy I have into what truly gives life, no matter what it costs. This is how seeds of faith are sown.

**Moving from acting to living means shifting from *intent* to *action*.** While "I'm praying for you" is a good sentiment, I think we need to go beyond it and move into the messy space of shared burdens.

**It's easy to adopt the "I'm doing great, how are you?" routine.** This politeness protects our pride, but it can prevent real relationships, genuine closeness and a community of faith and trust from forming.

**Taking off a mask** means offering a small piece of your raw reality to a trusted brother or sister in Christ. Stop settling for safe, shallow interactions and dare to let people see the real, unfinished you.

**It's easy to love when it fits into our schedule,** aligns with our preferences or costs us nothing. Cheap love looks for the exit the moment a relationship asks for our time, effort or money. Genuine love doesn't count the cost.

**I invite you to try the "inconvenience quiz."** Look at your calendar and your budget. If your love never interrupts your comfort, it might be a sign. True love shows up in the messy, inconvenient, middle-of-the-night moments. Take the quiz and then you'll know the answer to the question, "Who are we loving when it costs us our comfort, or when nobody is watching?"

**One, final truth: we can't generate this kind of unmasked love on our own.** We can only give it because we've received it. Jesus didn't wear a mask. He didn't pretend to love us. Jesus stripped himself of glory, bled and died for us. His love was entirely *sine cera*.

**I invite you to drop one mask this week.** Take a step outside your comfort zone. Consider how you can invest some of your love, time and self into a relationship. When you open your heart to someone, it takes courage and patience. But the rewards are great here and in heaven.

*"Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deeds and truth."*  
(1 John 3:18)

*Let us pray ...*

**Psalms 78:1-8 (CEB)**

**A maskil of Asaph.**

Listen, my people, to my teaching;  
tilt your ears toward the words of my mouth.  
I will open my mouth with a proverb.  
I'll declare riddles from days long gone -  
ones that we've heard and learned about,  
ones that our ancestors told us.  
We won't hide them from their descendants;  
we'll tell the next generation  
all about the praise due the Lord and his strength -  
the wondrous works God has done.  
He established a law for Jacob  
and set up Instruction for Israel,  
ordering our ancestors  
to teach them to their children.  
This is so that the next generation  
and children not yet born will know these things,  
and so they can rise up and tell their children  
to put their hope in God -  
never forgetting God's deeds,  
but keeping God's commandments -  
and so that they won't become like their ancestors:  
a rebellious, stubborn generation,  
a generation whose heart wasn't set firm  
and whose spirit wasn't faithful to God.

**Romans 12:9-18 (CEB)**

Love should be shown without pretending. Hate evil, and hold on to what is good. Love each other like the members of your family. Be the best at showing honor to each other. Don't hesitate to be enthusiastic—be on fire in the Spirit as you serve the Lord! Be happy in your hope, stand your ground when you're in trouble, and devote yourselves to prayer. Contribute to the needs of God's people, and welcome strangers into your home. Bless people who harass you - bless and don't curse them. Be happy with those who are happy, and cry with those who are crying. Consider everyone as equal, and don't think that you're better than anyone else. Instead, associate with people who have no status. Don't think that you're so smart. Don't pay back anyone for their evil actions with evil actions, but show respect for what everyone else believes is good.

If possible, to the best of your ability, live at peace with all people.