

“Beyond Great, Awesome and Amazing”

Romans 12:9–21

Julie R. Harley – August 28, 2011 – First United Church of Oak Park

School started this week.

As I jogged around my neighborhood, I saw parents walking their children to elementary school, holding hands, the kids looking eager – wearing sneakers that are still white on the bottom. I dropped off my youngest daughter, who’s beginning her senior year of high school. She joined the hordes of teenagers, all wearing their tiny headphones and their immense backpacks, each of them nervous about how they look to all the others.

This time of year is a huge rite of passage.

Most students approach the start of a new school year with a combination of hope and fear. Hope that you’ll make new friends and get good grades; fear that no one will sit with you at lunch and you will be mercilessly shamed in math class.

The hopes and fears of beginning a new school year are often specific: will my friends be in my class or will the kids I can’t stand be in my class again this year?

Teachers have an enormous challenge, because they have a roomful of students who come from very different homes with very different sets of values and expectations, and the teachers are expected to establish a common set of values and expectations for everyone.

But the big question that fuels our anxiety is this: I know what the rules are in MY house, but here there are lots of different people in one place. How will we BE together? What are the rules here? How will I be evaluated?

The early Christians asked those same questions as they met together in house churches in Rome in the first century CE. Most were poor, a few were rich. Most were men, a few were women and children. Most couldn’t read, a few were literate. Most were formerly Jewish, a few were Gentiles. Some had gifts of teaching, others were good at healing, some were great prayers, others had the charisma to start new churches.

The brilliant Apostle Paul wrote this section of his letter to the church in Rome to describe a covenant of behavior for these diverse folks. The Spirit had drawn them together from all walks of life to worship the God they had seen in Jesus Christ. And in 12 verses, Paul asks them to do 23 things that will help the world to know they are Christians. These are the house rules. They fall into four categories.

First – love one another with mutual affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.

Second – show hospitality to strangers, people you don't even know.

Third – bless your enemies and don't retaliate when they do evil to you.

Fourth – live in harmony with everyone, and don't claim to be wiser than you are.

Those are the expectations for behavior in the Christian community. The circle of love begins with those who are sitting in church with us, and it keeps extending out to include the whole world.

When I was in Nazareth last June, our Christian tour group met with a Muslim Sheikh named Abd Salaam Manasia. Before he became a Sufi, the Sheikh served as a leader of the Communist Party in Nazareth. But you know . . . God calls us from all sorts of burning bushes, and there's no doubt in my mind that he was called to be a leader and a scholar of Islam.

As we sat down in his study, this Muslim cleric could hardly contain his enthusiasm. "I love you! We love you all! We are all children of Adam and Eve, together. We love you so much! We are so glad you are here.

"We are the real elite Islam – not Wahabbis, not fundamentalists. You know who founded extremist Muslims? The British and Americans. We Sufis wouldn't touch the Bible or the Torah without washing our hands first. We don't agree with everything in the gospels or the Torah, but we believe they are from God.

"God is the source of all things, the one who teaches us to live together in peace. My middle name, Salaam, is the sixth of the 99 beautiful names of God. Salaam means the Source of Peace."

I will never forget the joy and love that filled this Sufi's face and his whole body. He was so excited as he talked that he began to sing! And those 99 beautiful names for God? We're lucky to get Americans to use one beautiful name for God.

A group called Public Policy Polling actually asked U.S. voters last month to rate God. How many of us approve of God's overall performance? Only 52% (which should give some comfort to President Obama: even God's poll numbers are low). 40 % are not sure and 8 % disapprove. How about God's handling of natural disasters? Only 50% approve. And even in the question of God's masterpiece – the creation of the universe itself – only 71% of those surveyed said they approve of the universe. 24% are not sure how they feel about God's creation of the universe and . . . wait for it . . . 5% actually disapprove. I guess some people are pretty hard to please.

All of this made me think deeply about the first part of Paul's behavioral covenant for Christians. How are we supposed to treat one another in the church? "Let love be genuine," he says. "Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor." (Romans 12:9–10) Maybe we all need to go back to school to expand our vocabulary of praise.

On today's bulletin cover, we hope to inspire you with "101 Ways to Praise a Child." Go home and Google it, and you'll learn to expand your vocabulary of praise with phrases like:

Outstanding, Super, Wow, You're Special, I'm Proud of You, Now You've Got It, Hot Dog, Dynamite, Nothing Can Stop You Now, Magnificent, Phenomenal, You're Growing Up, You Mean a Lot to Me, I Respect You, You're a Joy, That's the Best, and You Made My Day.

Pastor Rob Leveridge and his wife Shannon were elementary school teachers before he went to seminary and she went to medical school, and Rob says he posted the "101 Ways to Praise a Child" in his fourth grade classroom. Then he challenged the students to add new ways to praise others, and they came up with 50 more during the year. All I can say is, "Exceptional Performance," Rob!

How often have you watched a competition that challenged people to outdo one another in showing honor? Most of our competitions are designed to

beat out the other competitors, to win prizes for ourselves, or to vote someone off the island. What does it look like to “outdo one another in showing honor”?

To affirm a person is to see the good in them that they cannot see in themselves and to repeat it, in spite of appearances to the contrary. This does not mean we are blind to the reality of evil: it means we have a radar system tuned to the true, the good and the beautiful. (see Brendan Manning, *The Furious Longing of God*)

Many of you have probably heard about the work of Dr. Paul Farmer in Haiti. Tracy Kidder wrote a book about Paul Farmer’s mission called *Mountains Beyond Mountains*. For decades, Farmer has been working to combat chronic diseases in the poorest, most desolate and hopeless places on earth. One of his secrets is practicing a “Hermeneutic of Generosity.” With his H. of G., he evaluates people’s actions from an assumption that their motives are good: even if one might suspect the opposite.

If you’re trying to describe Paul Farmer with a Hermeneutic of Generosity, you really want to go beyond words like great, amazing or awesome. In fact, you might call Dr. Farmer: Gandhi-meets-Martin-Luther-King-meets-Mother-Teresa.

That’s one of the phrases developed by Chicago writer Arthur Plotkin in his new book: *Better than Great – A Plenitudinous Compendium of Wallopingly Fresh Superlatives*.

Plotkin points out that when we praise people, IF we praise people, we tend to have a limited vocabulary. We use the same terms over and over again: good, great, amazing, awesome, followed by really good, so great, totally awesome or **amaaaayyyyyzzzing**.

When we’re texting or emailing, we can use exclamation points, all caps, italics or emoticons. Sometimes words simply fail us, and we give up. Then we resort to phrases like unbelievable, unforgettable, indescribable, and beyond words.

Terms for the negative are more abundant and powerful than words for positives. You can tell, because sometimes we take negative words and turn them into positive words: He looks wicked fine, that car is really BAD, she is a killer beauty.

I bought this book because I've noticed I keep using the same word over and over again: great. I feel great. You look great. We're having great weather. The church is doing great. So I've challenged myself to go beyond great, amazing and awesome, and to start using some of these more expressive superlatives:

Bueno, butta!, cookin, cracking, crazy-talented, droolworthy, exquisite, fat of the bat, fist-pumping perfect, freakin' freaky great, great with a vengeance, heaven on a stick, resplendent, a walking force field, what great aspires to, so great it's almost wrong.

I can use a few of Plotkin's phrases to pay tribute to Cathryn Wilkinson on her farewell Sunday here: She's Steinway-quality, Stradivarian, Bravo-licious, a walking hymn.

Instead of "an open community united in love and justice" maybe we could change our church motto to "a community of professional lovers." Christian love is heart-felt affection of the believer in response to the love God has shown to us. It is both a response to God's love and a reflection of God's love.

Paul's letter to the Romans challenges us to expand our vocabulary of praise, for other people and especially for God. After I met the Sufi Sheikh, I sat down and wrote 99 beautiful names for the God I love. I invite you to do that this week as a spiritual practice.

The world will know us by our Christian love, or not.

In the late '60s, there was a student at a university in Ohio named Larry Malaney. He was ugly, short, obese, had a bad case of acne, a serious lisp, and hair that grew in four directions at once. He was not much to look at in terms of fashion either: a dirty T shirt, jeans with a butterfly on the rear, and no shoes. Even Larry said when he looked in the mirror he wanted to spit at himself.

Larry couldn't get a date, couldn't get into a fraternity, and had very few friends.

He went home over Christmas break to celebrate with his family in Providence, Rhode Island. Larry's family was lace-curtain Irish, meaning that his father always wore a suit and tie, had neatly trimmed hair and spoke in a

subdued voice. Larry and his father had the usual arguments over the holidays, and then it was time for him to go back to college. His father offered to ride the bus with Larry.

They got off at a stop and were about to board another bus to take them to the airport. Across from the bus stop, there were six men standing under an awning, all of whom worked at the same textile factory as Larry's father. They immediately began to heap abuse on Larry.

"Oink, oink, look at that fat pig. If that pig was my kid, I'd hide him in the basement. If that slob was my son, he'd be out the door so fast." The insults came fast and furious.

How would Larry and his father respond? In that moment, Larry's father did something he'd never done before. He reached out and embraced Larry and kissed him on the lips. He said, "Larry, if your mother and I live to be 200 years old, that wouldn't be long enough to thank God for the gift he gave to us in you. I am so proud that you're my son!"

That one act of praise changed Larry's existence. Larry's father healed him. He chose the high road of blessing in the face of cursing and taunts.

He saw the good in Larry that Larry couldn't see in himself. He affirmed his son with a furious love and changed the whole direction of his son's life. When Larry got back to school, he eventually cleaned himself up. He began dating a girl. He became president of a fraternity. And he graduated with a 4.2 grade point average.

The power to heal and to bless is in our hands, when we allow the love of Christ to flow through us. There is already enough pain, fear, judgment, anxiety, criticism and anger in this world; enough to flood every continent. Today, we can choose to live by new house rules: **"Love one another with mutual affection. Outdo one another in showing honor."**

We invite students and teachers to come to the front of the sanctuary now to receive a back-to-school blessing from our children's ministry leaders and pastors. We invite all who need healing (physical, emotional, mental or spiritual) to come to the back of the sanctuary, where our deacons and pastors will offer anointing with oil and prayer.

The question is not: Can we heal? The question is: Will we let the healing power of the risen Christ flow through us to reach and touch others, so they may dream and fight and serve and run where the brave dare not go? Every single one of you is beyond great, amazing and awesome. After all, we were created in the image of God, and at least 71% of us know that God does some pretty freakin' freaky great work. Amen.