

Burning coals (Romans 12:9-21)

Paul confronts a persistent barrier to true contentment: other people.

by [Erica MacCreaigh](#)

September 1, 2023

To receive these posts by email each Monday, [sign up](#).

For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.

Etta stomped into class, yanked off her backpack, and dropped heavily into her chair. Her fellow seminarians surmised that the news about Aunt Marilyn was not good.

"She's moving in with me," Etta growled.

We'd all hoped an alternative living arrangement might present itself. Etta insisted the only other option was death. "Let's just say it's a good thing murder's a sin," she grumbled.

In Romans 12, Paul confronts a persistent barrier to true contentment: other people. Indeed, most of Paul's letters address interpersonal conflict within the church. Two millennia later, the church's worst enemy continues to be itself. That's encouraging. We have centuries of practice not extinguishing ourselves.

Christ's socio-moral code sometimes seems unreasonable. The temptation is to stick to vague aphorisms that slide easily off the tongue ("Love your enemies") but fail to fulfill our very human need for satisfaction in troublesome relationships. Let's just confess that we struggle with this. Otherwise, we risk reducing the life of faith to toothless pleasantries only barely concealing hurt and dysfunction.

One day, Etta came to class unusually disheveled. She'd spent the weekend moving around furniture to Aunt Marilyn's endless dissatisfaction and was up most of the last night on yet another of Auntie's not-precisely-necessary emergency room visits.

Slumping over her desk, Etta said, "Christian love is an action, not a feeling. And sometimes the only love I've got is Christian love."

Paul probably knew this better than anyone, except perhaps the people who had to deal regularly with Paul. In Romans 12, he reminds his readers to eschew the satisfaction of vengeance. This being a church letter, Paul isn't imagining blood-letting vendetta but rather the type of vengeance that plugs a new toilet with cement because the property committee purchased it from Walmart, not the local hardware store. Paul's idea of vengeance is the mean-spirited and often underhanded actions that erode trust between Christians and, for many, trust in Christians.

Satisfaction, though, remains a deeply embedded human need. The problem isn't the itch; it's what we do to scratch it.

Humor helps. Jesus wasn't altogether serious when he told his disciples to give over their cloak to somebody demanding their coat. According to Douglas Adams (no, not *that* Douglas Adams) in *A Prostitute in the Family Tree*: "From studies of first-century social context, we know that most people wore only two garments: the coat was the outer garment, and the cloak was the underwear."

You want the shirt off my back? Please do take my undies, too. They're nicely broken in as I've been wearing them all week.

If the Son of God himself wasn't above a little humor, we should not be surprised to see Paul employing the same. Tacitly acknowledging that his instructions in Romans 12 can be a heavy lift, he invokes Proverbs' advice (I'm paraphrasing here): *Be nice. That'll show 'em.*

A smattering of smugness may be an entirely permissible satisfaction for mere mortals dedicated to practicing sacrificial love.

Three months after Aunt Marilyn moved, Etta came into class looking decidedly more relaxed. At first, we thought the worst (best?): Aunt Marilyn had gone on to her eternal reward, and Etta had gotten her house back. In actuality, Auntie was as

impossible as ever, but Etta's perspective had changed.

"I've chosen to be kind. It's what the Lord wants from me. Not my fault that kindness lands like hot coals on Auntie."

The grin on Etta's face said it all.