

“The Real and the Artificial, Part I: Let Love Be Genuine”
August 16, 2026

Romans 12:9-13
John 15:12-16a

Like many people, I’ve been hearing and reading and thinking about artificial intelligence. It’s hard not to. Much of what I’ve learned is disconcerting. Then came the op-ed piece whose title warned: “If You Weren’t Worried About A.I., You Should Be After the Past Few Weeks.”

In the coming weeks, I want to explore both the real and the artificial—and I’ll come back to that warning about AI on an upcoming Sunday. But it seems to me that if we are going to understand and deal with the artificial, we first need to consider the real.

And that’s not always easy.

Maybe you read about the exhibit at the New York Historical’s new Tang Wing for American Democracy. This beautiful addition is filled with windows that allows light to stream into the rooms. The exhibit features, among other things, a Grover Cleveland campaign kerchief, an assemblage sculpture by Betye Saar, a hand-lettered evening gown urging the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment, and posters by Norman Rockwell.

Or maybe not.

Within a month after opening of the show, all of these objects were removed and replaced with items that the wall labels admit are a “reproduction,” or a “facsimile.”

You know, a fake.

Artificial.

It was understandable. Museum personnel determined that the sunshine coming through the windows was a danger for some very light sensitive works of art. Left on display, they would be damaged.

In an interview, Devon Akmon, chairman of the board for the American Alliance of Museums, asked: “In a world where we’re seeing more and more things like artificial intelligence, do people want to see what they perceive as being the authentic piece?” And he wondered: “What is real?”

What is real?

It’s a good question for museum directors and philosophers.

And it’s a good question for us a people who seek to walk in the ways of Jesus Christ. This has been a concern for the church since its beginnings. We want our faith, our life, and our life *together* to be authentic. Real.

So, when Paul turns to how those early Christians in Rome should live, he says: “Let love be genuine.” Across the centuries, he’s speaking to us as well.

Make sure that your love is real.

The Greek sounds a little more urgent, a little more enthusiastic, reading something more like: “Love—Genuine!”

Paul does not want some substitute, some facsimile.

Of course, we’re good at making replicas. The French Reformer, John Calvin, in commenting on Paul’s exhortation, says: “It is difficult to express how ingenious almost all people are in counterfeiting a love which they do not really possess. They deceive not only others but also themselves, while they persuade themselves that they have a true love for those whom they not only treat with neglect, but also in fact reject.”

That’s the problem, isn’t it? We are so good at deception—and especially at self-deception.

If we weren't, we wouldn't be here. We would just go one our way, genuinely loving one another at all times, with no need to think about what we have done or haven't done, no need to confess our sin, no need to seek or offer forgiveness.

The very human inclination toward counterfeiting means that all too often we highly romanticize love—regarding as an omnipotent force which frees us from anything that suggests responsibility and bestows upon us an almost infallible instinctive capacity to know what is right and good.

So, as one person said that “I am never so dangerous as when I act in love. When I act in anger or aggression I put my conscience, my victim, and the community on guard. But when I act in love, I distort conscience, victim, and community, and I am free to do my worst without hindrance.”

As a result, “Love” is often offered as a cheap, convenient substitute for fairness in interpersonal relationships. “Love” is offered as the answer to complex economic and social problems that instead require both justice and mercy.

But the genuine love that Paul calls for is missing.

Still, Calvin holds out the hope that a deeper faithfulness is possible, affirming that “We can easily judge whether we have anything in the recesses of our hearts which is contrary to love.”

That's a challenge, though, isn't it—to look with unflinching eyes into the deepest recesses of our hearts, to change what we might see there.

With the danger and possibility of love in mind, let's return to Paul's words to the Romans:

“Love—Genuine!”

When love is real, we honor others. In faith, we affirm that each human being bears the image of the God who created and sustains us all. In our encounters with others, then, we remember and recognize that our encounters with others are also encounters with the hidden God. The call to

love is a call to honor the other person, created in the image of God as we also honor ourselves, created in that same image, while above all, we honor God. It is a high calling—and one we achieve only by the grace of God.

Here's what I mean by that:

When we think of how we are to live with one another in a congregation and how we as a congregation are to live in the world, love—real love—is our beginning and our destination. At those times when we just don't feel up to it, when *real* love seems out of reach, we listen to Jesus on the night of his arrest telling his followers: "Love one another as I have loved you." That is to say: "You have watched me. You have seen my actions that bring to life—*incarnate*—the way that is love. Go and do what you have seen."

Those cautionary words of UI graduate, Kurt Vonnegut, cemented into the sidewalk a block from here warn us: "We are what we pretend to be. So, we must be very careful about what we pretend to be."

It seems to me that, whether he wanted to or not, (and I doubt that he wanted to) Vonnegut was saying something very important about the Christian life.

We often think of pretending as inauthentic, as fake, as artificial.

Yet, quite often we are—in a positive sense—simply "pretending" to be Christians, pretending to be followers of Jesus who love as he has loved. The word suggests a moving into a space that isn't filled quite yet, an *intending* to be something or someone. We start by pretending to love as Jesus loved. We do those things we have seen him do: welcoming all people, setting aside judgment in favor of mercy, feeding the hungry, bringing healing into lives and relationships, speaking truth to power. We do these things even if we're not always sure why; even if we're not always sure we're doing them "right;" even if it doesn't feel "authentic."

We *pretend*—stretching ourselves into those actions, into the way of life that Jesus sets before us. And—maybe very quickly, or slowly over time—one day it occurs to us that our pretending has become love—genuine!

The grace of God.

And here is Paul.

Now, in the split between those who are for Paul and those who are against him, I fall completely in the “pro-Paul” camp. I know that he can seem judgmental and self-righteous—as we all can. But something surprised me. My reading of Romans sent me to other letters of Paul. Again and again, after angry words and comforting words, after condemnation and appreciation, he comes back to our love for one another as the one valid sign that we are following in the way of Jesus Christ.

And here he is, recommending love—and love alone—as the way of life.

“Love. Let it be real.”

What does the real thing look like? How to tell it from the counterfeit love that Calvin warned about? Love abhors what is evil—recoiling at such ways. It clings to what is good. This is to say that genuine love goes beyond deep affection and feeling—as valuable and as important as those are. It shows a practical care for the other person and seeks their well-being. If that is not happening, it is not love.

In many ways this is as simple as it seems. So, the Anglican bishop, N.T. Wright, affirms that there is “a large area of moral life that doesn’t need spelling out—everyone knows some things are good, others evil.”

You know that.

Live accordingly.

To help us in living out a genuine love, Paul provides a brief list of actions and attitudes that are appropriate for both a congregation and the individual members of the community:

tenderheartedness, respect, diligence, ardor, service, in hope—rejoicing, in suffering—patience, in prayer—perseverance, generosity, welcome. In all of this, through all of this, we serve the Lord.

As with all of the lists that Paul provides, this is not meant to be exclusive. No doubt you could add many other ways of showing genuine love, recalling times that you have been loved, times when you have been able to love. But this list is a good starting point—a good place to begin as we reflect on our actions and our love. In offering it, Paul seeks to move beyond developing personal piety, individual virtue, or a kind of private spirituality. His concern is that the entire Christian community would be built up and strengthened by the ways in which people act toward one another.

That is still our hope, our desire, today. We want to be part of a strong and healthy congregation. As a guide for this, we make certain promises to one other about how we will live together—our covenant in which we agree “to seek and respond to the Word and the will of God”—that is, to love one another as we have been loved. In this way we move forward together into an always uncertain future that God is making in us and through us.

This, then is real love. It calls us to seek the good. It empowers us to stand for the right. It is public and out in the open. It can bear the light of day and will neither fade nor diminish. It will empower us as we confront the increasing artificiality around us.

It requires no substitute, needs no explanation, because it is love—genuine!