

Sunday, August 30, 2020

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Romans 12:9-21

Through the Lens of Love

INTRODUCTION

What does it really mean to be a Christian? Is it just believing in the Gospel, or kind-of-hoping that Jesus actually did die for my sins so I can someday get into heaven? Well sort of, but Jesus taught us that the kingdom of heaven is at hand – here and now in this life! To be a Christian is to actually follow in the Way of Jesus. To live as a Christian means that we can practice living in the fullness of God’s presence today. This is an active faith that grows deeper and deeper as we order our lives and our behavior in harmony with the will of God. We live as stewards and guardians of this amazing planet and have a profound recognition of our divine connectedness with all people.

In Paul’s letter to the Romans he lists certain behaviors that should naturally flow from every practicing Christian. This is a radically different way of life than the commonly held behaviors that are acceptable in our culture. In chapter 12 he writes, *“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.”*

Paul knows that a spiritual transformation must occur in the depths of our being that is manifest in the way we think and act. Listen to Paul’s teaching about how the will of God is actually lived out in our world today...

SCRIPTURE READING Romans 12:9-21

Don’t just pretend to love others. Really love them.
Hate what is wrong. Hold tightly to what is good.
Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other.
Never be lazy, but work hard and serve the Lord enthusiastically.
Rejoice in our confident hope. Be patient in trouble, and keep on praying.
When God’s people are in need, be ready to help them.
Always be eager to practice hospitality.
Bless those who persecute you. Don’t curse them; pray that God will bless them.
Be happy with those who are happy, and weep with those who weep.
Live in harmony with each other. Don’t be too proud to enjoy the company of ordinary people.
And don’t think you know it all!
Never pay back evil with more evil.
Do things in such a way that everyone can see you are honorable.
Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone.
Dear friends, never take revenge. Leave that to the righteous anger of God.

For the Scriptures say, "I will take revenge; I will pay them back."
says the Lord. Instead, "If your enemies are hungry, feed them.
If they are thirsty, give them something to drink.
In doing this, you will heap burning coals on their heads."
Don't let evil conquer you, but conquer evil by doing good.

SERMON

Merciful God, Paul's writing sounds really good, but seems nearly impossible and so far out of reach in this world. In this time of division, conflict, and fear, may Your Word transform our minds and give us insight, understanding and renewed hope. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to You, our rock and our redeemer. AMEN

For me these days it feels like there is a monstrous storm organizing just off the coast of Rhode Island. I can feel it gaining strength hour by hour as it barrels up toward Massachusetts. I have nowhere to run and no good way to protect those I love, the community I live in or even myself. In the words of Bob Dylan, "You don't need a weather vane to see which way the wind blows." There is a storm a-brewing not only off the coast, but all across America and all over the world. And what is particularly hard for me is that, more and more I'm feeling powerless to effect any significant change.

As we worship together this morning, our nation is still in the grip of a deadly pandemic, we are experiencing massive unemployment and recession, many of our schools are unable to open, peaceful and violent protests continue to rage against the systematized injustices of ongoing, blatant racism and, the Texas/Louisiana coastline lies in ruins, once again leveled by a killer hurricane this past week. A storm so intense that meteorologists called it, "un-survivable" and in California, they are saying it's like Armageddon as massive wildfires once again rip through mile after mile unabated. As all of this mayhem roars across our land, our elected officials are consumed with navigating a political divide so deep and wide that it halts critical legislation. The political landscape is so fractured that it is splitting families and burning up the internet with incendiary attacks that fuel the discord. Republicans terrorize us with fears about how bad things would be in Joe Biden's America, and Democrats claim that all our problems trace back to the current administration. This does not feel like love.

We might like to think that this is as bad as it will get, but that would be naïve. Make no mistake, we are living in an unprecedented time of massive deconstruction, rampant disinformation, danger and chaos. And no matter who wins the day on November 3rd, we have more hard rain to weather. Our trust in government, institutions, commerce and social structure is being eroded away day by day. What we once thought to be scientific and statistical facts are now debated and politicized. The idea of civil discourse seems like a quaint notion of the past. This may just be the extended pandemic isolation talking, but as the storm clouds gather, I'm feeling as if I have less and less agency to do anything about it!

This is what fear does to a person. I can feel dread darkening my mind and terror physically churning in my body. What is going to happen next? What about our children and grandchildren? And, what, if anything, can I do about it? What *will* I do about it? All I know is that this fear does not feel like love, and left to run wild, these trying times threaten to overwhelm the light in my soul.

When I am confronted with this deep despair, I know it is time to turn off my computer, power down my iPad and silence my phone. I need to sit quietly and simply notice my breath, feel my blood pressure and release everything. Yes, these are troubling times, but I must continually realign myself in the bigger picture, a longer story than the current news cycle. I must remember that I am not alone. However socially distanced I might be, I am still surrounded by good people, compassionate people, loving people. They are Republicans and Democrats, conservatives and liberals, educated and unschooled, rich and poor, deeply religious and happily secular, all good, caring people. I know that we all recognize the same problems, and I also know that we can differ widely about the solutions, but the fact is that we are all in the same rickety boat, floating on a vast and threatening ocean. Now is the time for calm not fear. Panic will surely take us down. Now is the time when we really need each other. Now is a time to amplify love not intensify hate.

As my breathing slows and my pulse eases, I begin to remember that there *is* a critically important agency that we all still possess; to be a non-anxious presence in this all too often traumatizing world. God wants *US* to keep this rickety boat from toppling into the sea. Overcoming our anxiety in the face of what seems like overwhelming odds takes a conscious and intentional effort. It takes what Paul calls, "the renewing of our minds". To truly renew your mind requires nothing less than a radical spiritual transformation. The first and most critical step in this transformation begins when we stop spinning like a whirling dervish, unplug and recenter our being. It is then that we remember that the presence of God is still very much among us and our God always rescues, redeems and transcends the darkness around us.

No matter how dark times might seem, the Easter story clearly demonstrates that love always wins. When we dare to follow in the Way of Jesus, we begin to see our world as he did. We begin to see our life and those around us through the lens of love. To view these times through the lens of love, is the transformation that allows us to begin to think as Jesus did. To have the same mindset as Jesus did is to see our world from an entirely different perspective. The lens of love is the Christ consciousness that shatters the lens of indignation, hate and resentment. With the renewal of our minds, focused through the lens of love, we can clearly see a much bigger picture. The kingdom of God is at hand. Beyond all our cultural and racial divides, our widely varied opinions, political ideologies and personal experiences, there is an astounding underlying truth. Each and every one of us is bound together by our shared humanity. We are all made in the image and likeness of God. We are siblings of The Infinite Love, because God is love, and at our core essence, we are woven together in that Love.

Only when we see through the lens of love are we ready to take action. To love is to be in harmony with God and one another. This is how we are actually able to hate what is wrong

and hold tightly to what is good. Through the lens of love we can stand defiantly in the breach of chaos, division, and uncertainty without fear or anger, hate or resentment. Genuine love gives us the courage to speak truth to power as Jesus did and call out the injustices and toxins that need change, not only in “them”, but in us as well. To love as Jesus loved is to be acutely present to the fractured and heartbreaking reality of a broken world yet humbly channel God’s healing presence among us.

Through the lens of love, we can see beyond the restrictive boundaries of “us against them” and the narrow confines of our own limited experience. We can clearly see a broader horizon of promise, redemption and hope. Through the lens of love, we will know how to bless those who persecute us and not curse them. This is no easy thing. We may have to begin to bless through clenched teeth, but to follow in the Way of Jesus, we must learn to do it.

So, next time the twittersphere blows up your phone with abusive, unfounded, hate-filled attacks and your “breaking news alerts” ignite the next indignation in your heart, when you next wake to read about yet another tragic murder in our streets, notice how this does not feel like love, and you will know that you are wearing the wrong lens. Love weeps with those who weep and rejoices with those who rejoice. Love is patient in times of trouble and keeps on praying, asking only for God to focus our lens of love. This is the agency we all have that can never be taken from us and this is what God calls us to today. The practice of love, prayer and contemplation is more powerful than we even know. Let us all be unified in God’s love and practice loving one another with genuine affection. Let us be channels of God’s love to bring about the new day that surly awaits us beyond the mighty storms of today. AMEN