

“A Reminder of Important Things”

Romans 12:9–21

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As some of you may remember, our children were rising fifth and eleventh graders when we moved here just over seventeen years ago. They were both born in Richmond, Virginia, but while Ian went to preschool there, Ali went to the preschool at the church I served in Winston-Salem — Knollwood Baptist Church. They both had great experiences, but at Knollwood, one of the teachers had her students learn a saying that Ali repeated often, and I have echoed every time she gets in a car to drive back to Michigan or goes to the airport to get on a plane. “Be kind, be safe, be neat.” She always rolls her eyes, and often notes that I get the sequence wrong, but it is a nice summary of parental concern, a reminder of important things — be kind, be safe, be neat.

Writing to the church in Rome, the Apostle Paul offers something similar to his students, but Paul, being Paul, offers at least twenty-three admonitions, depending on how you count, too many to remember, too many to put on a bumper sticker or T-shirt. But in these words from Romans 12, Paul provides a picture of what it means to heed Jesus’ calling recorded in Matthew 16 to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him. All this talk about genuine love, hospitality to strangers, blessing those who persecute us — this is what following Jesus looks like. Or to put it another way, Paul presents an image of the church as a distinctive community which is something we need to keep in mind.

Writing commentary on this text for *Feasting on the Word*, (Year A, Volume 4, p. 16), theologian Eleazar S. Fernandez said this.

It appears that many churches have become so comfortable with the world that they have lost their identity as an alternative community. Driven by the desire for relevance and seduced by the much-coveted three Bs of success (building, budget, and bodies), churches have played footsie with the dominant culture without realizing soon enough that they have gone to bed with the culture of domination, privilege, accumulation, and consumption.

Worship is confused with marketing technique, stewardship with fundraising, spirituality with meditation techniques, vitality

with growth, and ministry with programs and services. Programs and services are good to have, but they often become the tail that wags the dog. What the church really has to offer is an invitation to a new community that nurtures believers to live differently and to live out their calling in the faith community and the wider society.

These words were published in 2011, but they seem relevant today. We are called to a different way of life, the way of cross, which Paul expands on for the early church in ways that are still meaningful for us. The challenge is sorting through all the admonitions. You don't want to hear a twenty-three-point sermon nor do I want to preach one, but perhaps I can offer a smaller number of themes that emerge in this text.

One central theme of this passage is humility. Outdo one another in showing honor, Paul says, do not be arrogant but associate with the lowly, do not claim to be wiser than you are. Even the callings to consider the needs of others and not seek vengeance for wrongs, which we will consider in more detail, begin in humility, refusing to put our needs first. This theme runs through the passage, and it echoes a central element of Jesus' ministry and the calling he gives to us.

It begins with his birth, with incarnation. Philippians 2 says that Jesus did not count equality with God as a thing to be grasped rather but emptied himself into the form of a slave who became obedient to the point of death. His entire life was given in service to others, and his calling to us, found in the reading from Matthew 16 is this. "If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." It's difficult to square anything arrogant or self-centered with the life and ministry of Jesus or our calling as his disciples.

We have known people who claim to be Christian who are arrogant, sometimes even in the ways they talk about faith. But we have also known people who humbly go about life, never drawing attention to themselves. Some work in the clothing ministry week after week, some serve on committees or fix things around the building or work on our landscaping. Some just quietly help people in their daily lives. Humility is a virtue, an attractive quality, and a central dimension of discipleship.

To be clear, we are not talking about forcing someone else into a subservient role. There is nothing noble or sacred about that. Too many people are beaten down and abused by family members or peers or because of their gender, identity, ethnicity, or national origin. They need help in building self-esteem, they need to

value themselves. Humility is self-chosen, often by people with a strong sense of self-worth while many arrogant people are hiding a lot of doubts or outright self-loathing.

Self-denial is not subservience nor is it false self-deprecation. I think of the story about a rabbi who threw himself on the floor near the bema, saying, “O God, I am nothing, I am nothing!” Noting this show of piety, the synagogue president threw himself on the floor, saying, “O God, I am nothing, I am nothing!” at which point, a man few people knew by name, threw himself on the floor, saying, “O God, I am nothing, I am nothing!” whereupon the president cut his eyes at the rabbi and said, “Would you look at who thinks he is nothing!”

Genuine humility leaves no room for condescension, nor does it make a show of piety to impress others. It’s more like a man in another setting who helped others all the time, visiting the sick and those who had known loss, giving people a jump when their battery was dead or changing their tire. His wife wanted him to be the chair of deacons, he had no interest in being in front of people, he just wanted to be of help in his own quiet way. He was a deacon, in the best sense of the word, and a model of humility. It’s not a very common quality these days, but it is a core part of our calling to follow Jesus, and it is much needed.

Another central theme of our text concerns acts of compassion. Love one another with mutual affection, Paul says, contribute to the needs of the saints, pursue hospitality to strangers, rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Paul describes a life of being sensitive to and caring for the needs of people around us. It too is a quality we find in the life and ministry of Jesus. The way of the cross is a way of self-giving love and sacrifice for others. It may not be very common in the world around us, but it is a central part of our calling.

It begins with the people closest to us. “The saints” are fellow church members, and contributing to their needs means what it says. Some of these needs are emotional. So, we are called to cry with those who cry. But some needs are more tangible. Most members of the early church were poor. So, Paul’s counsel was to make sure the community pulled together and people helped each other every way they could.

But Jesus’ love was not limited to family and friends, it was extended to all. Thus, our love is to be expansive too. Pursue hospitality to strangers, Paul says, not just people we don’t know, but foreigners, immigrants, refugees. For this is what the term means, and this calling to extend hospitality to these folks is the most common calling in scripture.

In the Hebrew canon, the Israelites are reminded that as they lived as foreigners in Egypt and needed help from others, they are to remember the stranger in their land, leave some food in the field, extend kindness. In the Christian Testament, we are reminded of this very same calling. As Jesus and his family had to seek shelter in another land when he was a child, we are to offer shelter to immigrants today. In the parable of sheep and goats, a preview of final judgment, Jesus says that when we welcome the stranger, we welcome him (Matthew 25:35).

This may sound edgy in a time when so many display hostility toward immigrants. We need security measures, and there are limits to how many people we can embrace, but all this can be balanced with compassion, if politicians will quit refusing to take action because they don't want the other party to get credit or they want to use this issue, these people, as a political tool. It may seem edgy, even partisan, but it shouldn't be. It's just doing what Jesus and Paul tell us to do, and the truth is we extend compassion to immigrants — through the clothing ministry, in our work with welcome house, and many other ways.

So, one theme of our text is humility, another is compassion, then there is the most distinctive part of our calling as followers of Jesus — extending kindness to those who harm us. Bless those who persecute you, Paul says, bless and do not curse them. Do not repay anyone evil for evil but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved never avenge yourselves... instead, if your enemies are hungry feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink.

Paul had sounded a little soft before, but now he has crossed over to the lunatic fringe! Yet, how much more Christlike can it get than to follow his teaching to love our enemy and pray for those who persecute us (Matthew 5:44). This is a man who forgives those who put him to death while they put him to death (Luke 23:34). It may seem crazy, especially if we think of it not just in terms of personal relationships but on a global scale, and yet, it may be the least crazy option there is.

When Desmond Tutu was asked about the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, how people could forgive horrible atrocities, he said this. "Many claim to be Christians. They say they follow the rabbi who, when he was crucified, said, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.' I sit and marvel at it all as I preside over the process of seeking to bring healing and reconciliation to a deeply divided, wounded, and traumatized nation... It is clear that if we look only to retributive justice, then we could just as well close

up shop. Forgiveness is not some nebulous thing. It is practical politics. Without forgiveness, there is no future (*The Sunflower*, p. 268).”

Think about the conflict between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, the wars between Israelis and Palestinians, the tensions between Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda, efforts to kill all terrorists which only produce more future terrorists. Vengeance never really works because the parties never agree on who started the trouble and thus when the score is even. It’s just back and forth terror until the end of time or until we destroy each other.

“Vengeance is mine; I will repay, says the Lord,” Paul says, quoting Deuteronomy 32:35.” Judgment is not our responsibility, and in the end, evil cannot overcome evil, only good can do that. It is a different way of living than what we see in the world around us.

I think of something Dolly Parton said to people who might follow in her path, the same Dolly Parton who not only was an incredible success in music and acting but also gave back to fellow musicians, responded to AIDS with compassion, gave millions of dollars of books to children, and expressed love for LGBT people even when she was criticized for doing so. She said, “Find out who you are and do it on purpose. And do it *with* purpose. Don’t ever sacrifice who you are, your principles and your morals and your values to just try to get ahead in business. It ain’t worth it.”

It’s a good word for individuals thinking about a career path, and it is a good word for the church. Jesus has called us to something different. Let’s be it and do it!