

Who Will Heed My Call? Romans 12:9-21 & Matthew 16:21-28

This morning I'd simply like to walk together through the reading from Romans. To do this is also to explore the Gospel reading. In our epistle, Paul gives specific moral instructions. But please, don't hear these as moralisms; I'm afraid you'll hear this passage as an instruction to "be nice". We need to hear them as an extension of what I've been preaching on for the past two weeks. They are very concrete instructions arising from the change in perspective about Jesus, and they offer a potential transformation, that may lead to a re-commitment of our lives to Christ. What Paul speaks of here results from presenting your body to God for the renewing of your mind. The image here is being molded into a people, a holy people, composed of holy individuals, to witness to the Creator God, the God of Jesus Christ; to be the Church, together. So Paul gets concrete with a whole chain of commands. He begins:

Let love be genuine. Paul is not being sentimental or syrupy. Love is the beginning and the end of our lives in Jesus Christ, for God is Love. Love is not defined by our experience, but by God. We love as we participate in God by the Spirit's power through the love that we see in Jesus Christ. Without love, we are nothing. You could have faith to move mountains, but who really gives a hoot? You could feed all the poor, and eliminate poverty, and it doesn't really matter. Love matters; Love is what we see in the Father sending the Son, Jesus Christ, and having this love spread in our hearts by the Spirit. Let love be genuine. Everything else that follows in this passage arises from love. It is possible to act like one loves without loving, to put on a show. But love must dwell in the core of our beings, the internal passion made evident in our actions. Being perfected in love is the end, the goal of our lives as human beings made in the image of God, for perfect love casts out fear.

Let love be genuine; Hate what is evil. Hate is a strong word. It involves a personal revulsion, despising, strong aversion. The command to hate the evil following the command for genuine love seems contradictory. Yet one cannot love evil. Do you hear that love is not sentimentality? Love is not tolerance. Evil is a perversion of what is, what is supposed to be, a perversion of what is good. The old saying, "hate the sin, love the sinner" is a way of trying to say this. When you see people hungry, when you see violence and death, when you see people, or anything else from within creation, exploited, we have to hate the evil if our love is genuine. Honestly, I hate the abuse of mind altering drugs, including alcohol. I see what happens to people I love. I understand why, the false comfort; yet I hate what the drugs do, the ruin they bring about. They are evil. When I find within myself the lack that is my sin, I hate it. We don't hate ourselves, but we hate what we're not, so that God might make us what we really are: creatures made in the image of the Triune God, creatures to love. Hate what is evil.

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil. Hold fast to the good. Love has a moral quality - love cannot be opposed to Justice. Love involves a moral judgment. Love involves the good, a commitment to the good, a means of discerning the good. In genuine love, hating the evil, the Spirit brings forth discernment, judgment in our lives that enfold us in the Spirit towards the good. We must be formed to know the good; our bodies must be placed under the moral formation of the Word of God by the presence of the Spirit within the body of Christ, the church, this concrete congregation. By genuine love, growing, maturing, perfecting love, we learn to hate evil. Then we can see what remains - the good. We don't hold on to evil - it will bring us down to its level of immaturity. We don't hate the evil to hold on to evil - whether it is in society, or in our own individual pasts. This is crucial. Through genuine love, hating evil, the good emerges for us to

fixate on. These three go together: let your love be genuine; hate the evil; hold fast to the good.

This holy wisdom provides the basis for the rest of the commands. The next three instructions relate to the life of specific congregations, the results of genuine love, hating evil, holding fast to the good. They relate to us!

Love one another with mutual affection. Paul speaks here very concretely. He is looking right at a specific congregation, yes, to us. In Christ by faith through baptism, God has made us part of a family. Love each other with mutual affection. Paul calls each person into these concrete relationships of love. Yes, the responsibility is on the individual to love. Captured by the love of God in Christ, love freely given by the Spirit, you have been pulled into a people that must learn to love. And it is a web of relationships that is the one body and each one individually members of it. We must be held together through ties of affection. When we grasp this, we see how a congregation is different from a consumer-based worship experience. We see that patterns of life have to change outside our walls, the "I'll use you; you can use me" stance that we've been formed in from our culture. Sure, we'll have deeper connections with some than others - that is fine, and understandable. But these webs of relationships have to connect; there has to be passion, affection, attachments, love that binds together in ways that make a difference in life amidst the world. There has to be mutual experiences that allow affection to grow, experiences by being not conformed to the world, but transformed by the renewing of your mind. In committing to a concrete life of a church family, affection must grow out of our genuine love - mutual affection that ties us concretely to each other. Love one another with mutual affection.

Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in

showing honor. Okay, I'm going to go from preachin' to meddlin'. The instruction is to show honor, not receive honor. We live in a culture of entitlement that feels that people owe us honor; it's our right. Sometimes a congregation can turn into a competitive environment to receive honor - to show respectability, to make up for lack of honor in the past, to prove one's gifts and talents. When we exist to receive honor, feelings get hurt. We feel that we all should be honored, acknowledged, that others owe us that, and if it is not forthcoming the way we feel that it should, well, that shows the deficits in others. The competition Paul speaks of is not to receive honor, but to honor others. In other places, Paul speaks of honoring those within a congregation who don't bear honor from the society at large. What you have is an image of a congregation competing to support the gifts of each other, to live thankfully, not because one is entitled to such acknowledgement - one receives honor only as a gift, not as an obligation. The instruction is to compete in giving honor to each other. Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.

Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit. Serve the Lord. Paul's grounding in real life is so evident here. How many of us have said, "I'm too tired" when it comes to offering our time in acts of service, in the type of congregational life that Paul commands? Sometimes we are. But without a personal passion, without zeal, without a concern to serve the Lord that comes from a burning in our bones, we just can't live the life to which we are called. It is interesting that the more "responsible we are", the more upwardly mobile, the more we're committed to "making a difference in the society", the more difficult it is to maintain a zeal, a commitment in serving the Lord. Other concerns sap our strength, our time, our interests. Other groups rather than the church slowly define our core identities. Soon we serve the town, the village, the boss, the business, or the spouse; we don't serve God. Paul sees, however, that passion, zeal, Spirit, is absolutely necessary to sustain the life of an individual within the body of

Christ, and therefore, to sustain the body of Christ in its witness in the world. Ardency of Spirit matters, for without it we will not be constant in the serving of the Lord.

Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit. Serve the Lord. Here is a second series of three. The next series of three move us into practices and virtues. These are necessary to sustain the lives that we live as the body of Christ.

Rejoice in hope. Without hope, human beings shrivel and die. But hope is in vain unless it is grounded in truthfulness. How many years have Cubs fans, like me, began the baseball season in hope. Paul speaks in the particular hope of Christians in the God who will restore all things to God's self, in justice through the return of Jesus. Rejoice in hope. Why is this important? Have you looked at the world lately? Do you want to talk about the uranium in N. Korea or the abandonment of the poor in New Orleans, or what each candidate has to offer? But more, rejoice in hope concerning those around us. God's Spirit is at work. Hope for oneself, not to be conformed, but to be transformed. Hope for others - that God's Spirit will make us holy. Hope can acknowledge what is, but looks more for what we can become. Hope provides the positive possibility to work for, to call others to, to give space for God to bring forth righteousness in my, your, and others lives and our world. See the potential, not the actual; rejoice in hope, have faith in what God can bring about.

Rejoice in hope; Be patient in suffering. Do you see the connection? If one rejoices in what can happen in the future, one still must live in the present. One looks to the end, but lives in the now. We can hope in the potential, but we live in the actual. Be patient in suffering. Patience is the inner virtue that must accompany hope. To lose hope is to close the future; to live impatiently in the present closes the future just as much. We demand patience for ourselves, but we have little for others, or

for the church. We forget the building of cathedrals that would take hundreds of years of loving labor. Instead, Paul calls us to patience in suffering. Yes, hope that is seen is not hope; but rejoice in hope. Don't let hope frustrate you in the present, especially the suffering and sacrifice that comes our way by the lack of God's kingdom present in the world, the lack of the type of love and righteousness and wisdom that we would like to find in others. Suffering will come. Sacrifice is necessary. Please understand, God does not deliver you from suffering in Christ but calls you into suffering in solidarity with Christ amidst this mess made of creation. Life in the body is not an escape from suffering; it is immersion in suffering that God uses for the redemption of the world, suffering that arises out of rejoicing in hope. Paul gives us the framework necessary for sustaining life in the body of Christ in the world. Rejoice in hope; be patient in suffering.

And persevere in prayer. How can we sustain hope, endure suffering patiently? One practice: prayer. We must open our lives to God in prayer, to sustain the ardency of Spirit, to compete in honoring each other, to letting love be genuine. Prayer, focused time of allowing our lives to be unfolded into the Life that is God, allowing the Spirit to transform us by bringing our concerns, frustrations, sufferings, loves, desires, hopes, silences, unbelief, belief, to God. Hear the honestly: Persevere: it ain't easy. Keep at it. Do it whether you want to or not. Develop a habit. If not, if one cannot sustain a prayer life, patience at others and oneself in this world will dry up - the suffering will cause bitterness; one will not rejoice in hope, but instead, be shaped into a despairing cynic. Prayer, having one's life rendered open before God, keeping at it, becomes necessary if patience in suffering and rejoicing in hope is to occur.

Prayer, patience, and rejoicing is going to be necessary if we are not to lag in zeal, outdo each other in honoring one another; develop the love of mutual affections. Zeal, honoring, mutual

affection is necessary if we are to grasp the good, hate evil, have love be genuine. And all of these are necessary if we are to live with our individual gifts as a rightful part of the Body of Christ, so that we might not be conformed to the world, but transformed by the renewing of our minds.

I could go on. These are not all of our instructions: Listen to the rest of the commands within the passage. They also are utterly consistent to sustain the witness of the body of Christ in the world, and the formation of the body of saints in its midst to make this family holy. These sayings take us to the core of the kingdom of God lived and proclaimed by Jesus.

Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice. Weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. 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. Do not overcome evil with evil, but overcome evil with good.

In other words, live out in the world what your God does for us here. For we cannot have the visible presence of the church in the world, living its distinctive way different from the world, without the gift of Jesus, crucified and raised up. We can't have the Church without a passionate faith in Jesus the Christ by the presence of the Spirit that reconciles us with God. That's why all of what Paul's said to live out in the world, depends upon us stewards of the kingdom. Come, come in repentance; come in hope; come in patience; come in prayer. But above all, come and be thankful.

I ask you now, if you are willing and able, to re-commit your lives to Christ and to each other as a member of the United Methodist

Church, knowing that since the beginning of your relationship with this church family you've enjoyed the love and protection, worship and fellowship, service and witness of the family of God. Little has been asked of you in return because the expectation is that any vow you've made to God, you've been faithful to complete, that you've understood the call on your life, and have been willing to re-frame your priorities to be in-sync with God's priorities, that you've been active in prayer, study and action in the cause of Christ. That you are willing to sacrifice as needed to make disciples for that same Jesus. And that God will bless your willingness to give all that is required. This is a statement of faith and of promise. Are you willing? For those that are willing, I ask the following:

Will you be loyal to the United Methodist Church, and uphold it by your prayers, your presence, your gifts, and your service? And think deeply before responding, too many of our vows are so easily broken before God.

Answer: ***I will.***

So I ask each of you to do all in your power to build up the Body, to increase faith, confirm hope, and perfect each other in love.

Amen!

Sources:

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Pastor Karyl Hopp, Thursday, August 28, *Daily Devotional*

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