

Sermon – August 31, 2014

Romans 12:9-21

⁹Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹²Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. ¹³Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. ¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. ¹⁷Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” ²⁰No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” ²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

I speak to you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

What is our purpose in life? That is our focus this morning.

Scripture is persistent. Again and again we read that our purpose is to follow God's way.

This is a theme both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament.

Following God's way, being a people set apart or holy is a strong message in Matthew and equally in Paul's epistle to the Romans.

Today's reading from Romans says:

Love one another with mutual affection.

Bless those who persecute you; do not repay anyone evil for evil.

If your enemies are hungry, feed them;

if they are thirsty, give them something to drink.

Contribute to the needs of others; extend hospitality to strangers.

**Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep,
associate with the lowly.**

Live in harmony with one another. Persevere in prayer.

It is really quite clear, or is it?

In the mid 1980's, during the cold war, when concrete barriers and barbed wire divided East Berlin from West, there was a young man who passed through the Berlin Wall at Checkpoint Charlie nearly every day. Driving a pickup truck with a couple of bicycles tied to the top of the load, he would be stopped by the German guards, who would thoroughly search his possessions.

Some days, under the bicycles and tarp, were pails of sand, and the guards would empty every one of them onto the pavement, looking for contraband. Other days, when the guards pulled off the bikes and the tarp, they found boxes of books. They would unpack every box and leave them scattered on the ground. Still other days, he carried pallets of blocks, or rolls of sod.

The routine was always the same: stop the truck, inspect the load, and send the man on his way. The guards never found anything illegal, but each day the young man was required to reload his truck, tie the tarps down, and throw the bikes back up on top of the load. It was a daily inconvenience, as you can imagine.

After the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, this young man met one of the border guards at a tavern in downtown Berlin. Over glasses of beer, they reminisced about the loads he carried, and the daily ritual that they now laughed about. Then the former guard got serious, and said “Comrade, we know you were smuggling something, but we could never figure out what it was. Now that the danger has passed” the older man said, “tell me...what you were smuggling?”

And the younger man answered “Bicycles. I was smuggling bicycles.”

Sometimes in this life, the most important things are right in front of us, so obvious we risk missing them.

Contribute to the needs of others; extend hospitality to strangers.

Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep, associate with the lowly.

Live in harmony with one another. Persevere in prayer.

Did you ever see the TV commercial where a man is jogging through a city neighborhood, wondering what kind of car to purchase. He passes more than a dozen different Volkswagen Jettas. Even though they nearly run him over, he doesn't notice them.

The German border guard was looking for something hidden in the young man's truck. But the illegal import was in plain sight. He missed it because it was so obvious.

I wonder whether **we too** sometimes miss what is most important because it is so obvious?

Live in harmony with one another. Persevere in prayer

Or is it that we get distracted by other things which seem promising but in the end, do not offer fulfillment?

Do we search afar for purpose and meaning when they are right in front of us? Do we believe that what is essential is a higher salary, more insurance, an exotic trip, a new house, or a new car or a new restaurant! But these do not satisfy.

What is important, we find in today's reading from Romans. Just nine verses, capture what it is to be a Christian.

Love one another with mutual affection.

Bless those who persecute you; do not repay anyone evil for evil.

**If your enemies are hungry, feed them;
if they are thirsty, give them something to drink.**

Contribute to the needs of others; extend hospitality to strangers.

**Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep,
associate with the lowly.**

Live in harmony with one another. Persevere in prayer.

Have any of you have heard of the Taize community in France? The community is one of the world's most important sites of Christian [pilgrimage](#). Over 100,000 young people from around the world make pilgrimages to Taizé each year for prayer, Bible study, sharing, and communal work. Through the community's ecumenical outlook, they are encouraged to live in the spirit of kindness, simplicity and reconciliation. Accommodation is very basic.

Brother Roger was the founder of Taize. He was a man who grasped the simple truths of Christ. In 1940, he founded a community of ecumenical brothers who live these simple truths. Their community numbers only 100. Some are laymen, a few are priests. They support themselves entirely by their own efforts. They do not accept donations of any kind. Their worship is distinctive. They sing simple chants, they pray inbetween. Their visual focus are icons of Christ illuminated by colonies of votive candles. You will see it at the end of the sermon

But on August 16, 2005, something shocking happened during evening prayer at Taize. Brother Roger, the founder, was stabbed and killed by a Romanian woman. The community and the world were stunned. Brother Roger's body was laid out in the church and every day for a week, thousands came sadly to pay their last respects. He was 90 years old.

10,000 people attended his funeral. His successor, Brother Alois, spoke. He said there were 2 convictions which Brother Roger held dearly. These 2 convictions sum up very well Paul's directions to Christians in the passage in Romans.

First, Brother Roger believed that

God is united to every human being without exception.

God is united to all human beings, from every nation, in particular young people and children.

Because God **is** there in **every** human being without exception, it is our task to Love one another without exception. Why bless those who persecute us? Because God is present, even in those who do not like us; even in those who let us down,

even in those who are unkind. Even though this is clearly laid out, this is not easy; especially when we live closely with others, in families, in parishes, in schools and in the workplace.

Out of Taize, no words of anger or accusation came against Luminata Solcan, the Romanian woman who stabbed Brother Roger. Brother Alois in his funeral address said

“ With Christ on the cross we say to you: Father, forgive her, she does not know what she did.”

Here is another story. In 1960, Adolph Coors III, owner of the Coors Brewing Company, was kidnapped and murdered by a man named Joseph Corbett. The son of the murdered man, Adolph Coors IV, was just 14 years old at the time. His life went into a tailspin that continued for years. But in 1975, he came to faith in Jesus Christ. One of the first things he did as a young Christian was to travel to prison to forgive Joseph Corbett, and to ask Corbett to forgive him for feeling intense hatred toward him for 15 years. Ironically, Corbett refused to see Coors. But Adolph Coors offered forgiveness in a letter, and was relieved of the hatred that had shackled him for half of his life.

The 2nd conviction Brother Roger is the Gospel value of **kind-heartedness**. It is not an empty word, but a force able to transform the world, because, through it, God is at work., said Brother Alois.

The story is told of a pro-life organization holding a protest outside a Planned Parenthood office on a cold winter morning. The director of the Planned Parenthood office committed a random act of kindness; she brought hot cocoa and cookies out to the group that was protesting against her office. At first, the protesters refused to drink the cocoa! “It’s a trick” they thought. And only when the director herself came out and drank some of the cocoa did the protesters pour cups for themselves. But that act of kindness opened up a dialogue between the two sides that helped them see each other as people - not enemies.

Ancient Jews had a saying

“we cannot laugh so long as there is one person weeping.”

This is kind heartedness. Another word for ‘kind heartedness’ is compassion. If we lived by it, we would be uncomfortable until all people had enough food to eat, medical aid, jobs, schools to attend, and houses to call home. But in order to do that, we would have to share in a radical way.

So...the two bicycles on top of the load that sum us up as Christian people are:
To see God in every person and
to be kindhearted.

They challenge us to live a new life. Even in small ways, if we can treat those we dislike with respect; if we can respond with kindness to the needs of others around us...it pleases God. These are the fundamentals of walking in Christ's footsteps. Our new attitudes may not change others, but these new attitudes will change **us** and free **us**. And that is precisely what God wants to do. Amen.

Let us pray:

O God, please send us strength so we can show kindness for your people even when we do not feel kind. Free us from fear. Nourish us with hope to walk the path of kindness. Amen.