



Humility and Peace
Romans 12:9-21
Stephanie Hamilton
Washington Street UMC
June 27, 2021

Good morning church family. For those who don't know me, my name is Stephanie Hamilton, I've been a Washington Street Member for a few years now. If you typically sit on the main floor of the sanctuary during service, you may not have ever seen me. Shout out the balcony crew!

I'm delivering this message today because of a Facebook post. Seriously. Pastor Thomas read a FB post of mine and said "it sounds like you have a sermon in the making"... and so here I am. So whatever happens in the next 30 minutes, you can blame Mark Zuckerberg.

In this post, I was lamenting the country's political divisions. Well, not the divisions themselves, but how little thought seems to go into the decisions that divide people, and how quick people are to judge or dismiss each other if they disagree. I even used the word "sequacious" which means "a person lacking independence or originality of thought" as I was sharing just how disheartened I am at the lack of critical thinking that contributes to these divisions. We agreed that today's passage made the most sense for me to discuss, as there's a lot in here that - if taken to heart - can tear down walls and bring people together. There are also things that hint at some of the underlying causes of division.

I confess that I had more than a little trepidation about trying to put together a sermon, and this has been a real struggle for me. I had Pastor Thomas review two very different versions of today's sermon, and this one - in its final form - may be different even from those.

I've struggled because 1) I'm not a biblical scholar, nor am I a teacher or preacher, and 2) this passage is so rich that I struggled to focus in one specific direction. And so, as a wonderful mentor of mine has often suggested, I'm going to begin with the end in mind.

In the end, there are two phrases from Romans 12:9-21 that I want us to carry with us into the coming days, weeks and months: "never be wise in your own sight," and "so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all." Humility and peace. That's what we're talking about today.

When I was in 10th grade, my mom agreed to enroll me in a Catholic high school. We weren't Catholic. In fact, we didn't practice any kind of religion or spirituality. I wanted to go because that's where my best friend was going. I was born in Lincoln, Nebraska, and my best friend and I met in day care, before we'd even started school. By 1st grade, we were virtually inseparable. When I was in 5th grade, my mom and I moved to Kansas City. We lived there for a few years, and during that time I stayed in touch with my best friend, visiting her often when we would go

back to Lincoln to see family. When mom and I moved back to Lincoln, I didn't want to be the "new kid" in high school, so I asked if I could go to high school with my best friend. And mom said ok.

Each semester our high school required us to take a religion class. And at first, I was pretty excited, because I thought I'd be able to learn about this religion's traditions, history, and why they believed the things they believed.

One day, however, the teacher in my religion class said something I vehemently disagreed with. I don't have much of a poker face, so my displeasure was obvious. His response was "if you don't have faith enough to just believe, maybe you shouldn't be here." He made it very clear that I wasn't supposed to ask questions. Wasn't supposed to doubt, and certainly wasn't supposed to disagree.

Let me make an important caveat to this story - please, please don't read this as a criticism of the Catholic Church or faith. That's not my intent. I use this story simply because it's one of my most vivid memories of a time someone expected me to be sequacious - to not have independent thought. And it's one of my most vivid memories of a moment that was utterly lacking in humility and peace, from both the teacher and from me.

In verse 10 of today's passage, Paul tells us to "Love one another with brotherly affection..." What he refers to as brotherly affection is modeled in the parable of the Samaritan - it's an affection that is kind, generous, mindful, and intentional. So in verse 10, Paul exhorts us to love each other. He then uses the rest of the passage to describe what that love looks like.

His description includes v. 16, which ends w/the phrase "never be wise in your own sight."

The religious leaders from my high school would say this phrase undergirds the expectation that their students don't question their teachings. But I respectfully disagree. Because this sentence is directed at the entire Church, including its leaders. Maybe especially its leaders, because a leader convinced of his or her own rightness or wisdom can mislead in ways that are harmful, even destructive.

To never be wise in your own sight is, at its most simple understanding, a call to humility. It's a necessary position for our hearts and minds to be in if we're going to love one another. Because none of us can truly, selflessly love another person without humility.

But "never be wise in your own sight" goes further, and deeper than that. It compels us to acknowledge that we don't know another person's lived experiences or thoughts or feelings better than they do. And to acknowledge that we have things to learn from other people - that they may have knowledge, wisdom, and understanding that we don't. It compels us to listen, and really hear another person's point of view. It compels us to put our hearts and minds into a position of learning, of seeking to understand, not just to be understood.

When I was sitting in that religion class back in high school, that's not what I did. Neither did my teacher. When faced with someone whose beliefs were different, we both did an about-face, turned away from each other (figuratively speaking) and refused to engage. And though we'll never know for sure, we both probably lost out on something as a result - a chance to learn, to grow, to connect with another person. Maybe even a chance to deepen our understanding of God and His Church.

To "never be wise in your own sight" also requires critical thinking. It requires asking questions, of others and of ourselves. We live in a culture where the talking head is king. Opinions are presented as facts and **there's a strong temptation, and ample opportunity** to only listen to opinions that line up with our existing beliefs or ideology. Too many people go blindly along with whatever leader or media personality says the things they agree with. If that person says something they disagree with.... They're outta here. They move on, in search of the next person who will tell them what they want to hear.

I believe we have a responsibility to think critically. To ask questions. To humbly ask with the intention of learning and understanding others, and to evaluate what's being said, not through the lens of what we want to hear, but through the lens of the Holy Spirit. I believe we have to ask questions, not just of others, but of ourselves. To ask ourselves if the people, ideological positions, or personalities we align ourselves with reflect the love, grace, and acceptance of Christ.

To "not be wise in your own sight" means being humble enough to consider the possibility of being wrong. It's not a fun idea to entertain. And it takes work. I mean.. let's just admit it. It's so much easier to hold fast to the beliefs and ideals I already have. Then I don't have to think. I don't have to engage my intellect. I get to stay comfortable and unchallenged in my safe little corner. And most importantly, I don't have to be wrong. And boy do I dislike being wrong. I used to be terrible at admitting even the possibility that I could be wrong, let alone admitting when I'm actually wrong. I'm better at it now, but still have work to do.

When I first moved here, I lived in a house with 4 other women. We were all Christians, and our political ideologies ran the full gamut, from liberal to conservative. As you can imagine, we disagreed about some things. And disagreed vehemently. But rather than ignore each other or our differences, we talked about them. A LOT. Because I'm a debater by nature, I had to be mindful of my intentions. Too often, in the beginning, my goal was to persuade. I didn't actually care about my friends' opinions, or why they had them. I just wanted to win them over to "my side." There was not an ounce of humility in my behavior or in my heart. I wanted to be right. More importantly, I want to not be wrong.

To their credit, my housemates were always willing to talk to me, even when they knew I wasn't really listening. Over time, however, because of their incredible patience and grace, and because of **their** humility, I learned to listen. To listen and really hear them. Our talks evolved from debates to actual conversations. Over the years, as we talked, we all changed a little. Our perspectives and opinions shifted a little as we considered what each other were saying. My

friends and I learned a lot about each other during those conversations, and we developed a real affection for one another. Not in spite of our differences, but because of them. To this day, they're some of my closest friends. And guess what? All the times I was wrong?.... I survived. :) And so did my relationships.

Today's culture doesn't encourage listening. It doesn't encourage critical thinking. And it certainly doesn't encourage critical self-reflection. And I want us to push back against that. To lead by example and show the power of humility. To be a community that listens. And hears. And accepts.

Listening to, and really hearing, another person is an act of love. It's a real, tangible way to love one another in the way Paul tells us to. In the way God commands us to.

That humility, and that love are necessary in order for us to internalize and live out the other verse I want to focus on.

Verse 18 - If possible, as far as it depends on you, live peaceable with all. This has long been one of my favorite verses, because it's filled with possibility. The possibility that I am capable of affecting change.

The word that translated here as "depends" is the Greek work "ek." Strong's bible concordance says that it's "a primary preposition denoting origin from or out of"

"Denoting origin from or out of"

"Ek" is the place where something starts. In this passage, it's the place where peace starts. And that place is you and me. "As far as it depends on you" Paul says. To the degree that you're able to be a catalyst for peace, be a catalyst for peace. Paul is telling us that, by the grace of God, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the power of Christ, we can help usher in peace. Between individuals, within communities, maybe even within nations. We can be catalysts for peace.

Back to the Catholic high school example - neither my teacher nor I were trying to live at peace with the other. I can't speak for him, but for me, the idea of living at peace with him wasn't even a thought. It honestly never occurred to me to even try. The result was three years of conflict. We never got along. Never trusted each other. Proverbs 27:17 says that "as iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another." We could have been that for each other. Even with our limited interactions, we could have helped sharpen each other. Because living at peace with others doesn't mean you'r not sharpening each other. It just means the sharpening happens in a way that builds up, instead of tearing down.

My housemates and I sharpened each other. And though it was sometimes uncomfortable, it was also pretty awesome. Because we were allowing ourselves to be used by God to help each other become more like Christ.

It's worth noting that the word translated as "peace" is not "shalom" but "i-rane-yoo'-o" - the root word of which can mean peace between individuals (harmony), and can also mean security, safety, prosperity. In his very helpful feedback on my draft text for this message, Pastor Thomas pointed out something I'd missed - that this word "i-rane-yoo'-o" is an active verb that denotes an active working towards peace, working towards harmony.

Through his servant Paul, God is compelling us to actively work towards living at peace with others. To be the catalyst for peace, for safety, for security. What better way to love one another with a brotherly affection, a Parable-of-the-Samaritan-level of love than to create places that are safe, secure, and harmonious. That's the role the Church is called to play. The mission it's called to fulfill.

Live peaceable with all, he tells us. Create safe spaces for everyone. Harmony for everyone. That's what we're called to do. Who we're called to be.

My DC housemates created a safe space for me. And over time, I learned to create a safe space for them as well. Because we made intentional, ongoing efforts to live at peace, to never be wise in our sight, and love one another with brotherly (or, in this case, sisterly) affection.

I want to encourage you to meditate on those phrases in the coming days.

Love one another with brotherly affection.

Never be wise in your own sight.

As far as it depends on you, live peaceably with everyone.

Thanks be to God.