



God's People

Romans 12:9-21

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Last fall, we had a two-month worship series that asked the question, why does the church exist? Looking at the basics of structure and history, commitment and covenant, we asked what it meant for a church like ours to be faithful to what God is doing in the world today. What does it mean for a church like Washington Street UMC, with its 170 years of ministry, to be faithful to our call in the current cultural and communal society? At the root of that series last fall was this underlying claim that the gifting of the Holy Spirit gives the rawest and truest glimpse of God's desire for the church: *to be a living witness and testimony to the goodness of God in the world.*

If you will, in this way, the work of the church is essential.

There are people in this world who do not believe they are worthy of God's love, and someone needs to proclaim for them their worth. *This is essential work.* There are people in this world who are dying of systemic racism that still plagues our nation, and someone needs to work to proclaim their equal worth in the world. *This is essential work.* There are people in this world who are without jobs, without money, without homes, and without healthcare access, and they need someone to speak up and work on their behalf to proclaim they are still worthy as God's created beings – they need someone to feed them, to house them, to employ them, and to care for them. *This is essential work.*

Perhaps we were not clear enough when, on March 15, we first moved worship to be only online, that none of this work was stopping just because we would not be meeting in person. That's why it's called *essential work* – because it has to continue regardless the circumstances of the world around us. Perhaps it wasn't clear enough through our Easter in Exile sermon series, but God has not abandoned us in the midst of this pandemic. God has not left us to fend for ourselves. God continues to raise us up and empower us as the church to share in the work of God in the world. Perhaps we didn't make clear enough the promise of Christ, when he said, "Though, I am ascending, you will still do great works because of my power – and yet, even greater works will you do than even what I have already done."

If you missed that memo, let's refocus ourselves real quick: though we are not meeting in person on Sundays, so as to prevent any further spread of the novel coronavirus and prevent any *further* harm the virus is able to cause among the community, the church is very much open; we are still functioning as God has called us to function. We are still working on living out our mission of *Making a Place for Everyone to Know God's Love*. We are still proclaiming the Good News of God's love for humanity. We are still working to provide food for the hungry. We

are still working to offer comfort to the mourning. We are still working to provide new life to the dying. We are still working to be the Body of Christ the world so desperately needs.

This has been *essential* work for the entirety of the past 10 weeks.

Now – and in all fairness – it is worth asking, because the world has changed a bit in the past two and a half months, what does this work look like in the world today? What makes us, the church, different than any other organization that exists in the community? What makes us God’s people? ***What makes us the church?***

Over the coming month, we’re going to be wrestling with these questions amidst a very unexpected season of life. This is not what we expected to live through in 2020. And yet, perhaps such wrestling is just what we need. Perhaps it’s time for us – not just Washington Street UMC, but as *the church* – to rethink and re-answer, what does it mean for us to be God’s people? What is the purpose of the church in the world today, and how do we live out that purpose?

To help us frame these questions, and to help us think through any generated answers, we’ll be using the book *Having Nothing, Possessing Everything*, by Rev. Michael Mather, a United Methodist Pastor out of Indianapolis, and faculty member at DePaul University. If you haven’t picked up a copy yet, I invite you to do so so that you can continue the conversation during the week through your own reading. I will also be offering a book-study on Wednesdays for further conversation (you can sign up online to participate).

To begin this conversation today, we’re using Paul’s letter to the Romans. This epistle letter to the church of Rome is a theological treatise. Paul is laying out the underlying theological foundation for the church, and those who call themselves God’s people. Here in chapter 12, Paul is offering a distinct look at the core tenants of personal relationships that should define the relationships of those who profess Christ as Lord.

Paul Achtemeier, a Professor of Biblical Studies, offers that in verses 9-13, the apostle Paul is looking at a solution to pride and over-inflated egos. He offers that each of these statements “demonstrate unhyprocritical love in action.”ⁱ The apostle begins in verse 9 by saying, “Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, and hold fast to what is good.”

It’s helpful to name here that, in the context of Paul’s writing, the invitation to hate what is evil is not about hating the evil of others – Paul is speaking directly to the faithful. He’s inviting the individual believer to hate the evil that stems from their own mal-intentions. Couched in the opening invitation to have genuine love, Paul is saying, “Get rid of your own malice toward others, don’t abuse love for your own well-being, but hold on to the good of God’s love – let your love be genuine.”

Paul continues in verse 10, “Love one another with mutual affection; give more honor to the other than you take for yourself.” The invitation of love, as Paul offers it here, is to humble

yourself for the betterment of the other. The focus of this love is not your own benefit, but the benefit of the whole. This is indicative of the love shown by God in Christ. The way to benefit the whole is through your own selflessness and humility.

Paul picks back up in verse 11, saying, “Do not be dis-earnest, but be strong in your spirit that you may serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, and persevere in prayer.” The type of love Paul is asking for the believer to share with others is built upon one’s faithfulness to God. “All this is simply a statement of what the love is like for one who follows Jesus, who gives oneself daily to Jesus.”ⁱⁱ

And the love is not just for those who are closest to you – it is not just love for the fellow church member. Paul offers this explicit instruction, “contribute to the needs of the saints, and extend hospitality to strangers.” This is not a friends and family benefit – this is a love that is to be extended to everyone in the community. The saints – a shout out to those who were no longer working, and who at that time wouldn’t have had anything close to the pensions we see today to care for themselves – needed the support of the working community. And the strangers – those who were unknown to the community – were expected to be welcomed, lifted up, and show mutual affection through this generous hospitality.

Now, honestly, though we’ve got some work to do to fully live into this mindset, none of this seems that hard. Most churches are pretty good at extending love to one another, and they at least try to offer hospitality to the stranger. We have entire ministries in churches focused on offering hospitality to a first-time worshipper. The church at leaves give voice to this kind of work.

I can’t say our society is very good at any of this – especially the welcoming of the stranger part, or the humbling love part, or the patient in suffering part, or the having genuine love part ... ok, so, generally speaking, our society is terrible at living anything close to this. But, to be fair, our society is not governed by Paul’s theological and Christian-based instructions. These instructions are only offered to those who profess Christ. So, as long as those leading the nation, or voting for national policies aren’t claiming a Christian witness, there’s no need for them to exhibit such humble, gracious, and other-serving love.

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Back to the church – these ideals are foundational to our relationships with one another, and provide for us the underlying tenants for our identity as a people of God – and collectively for us as *the church*. But Paul isn’t done in his instructions. He doesn’t just focus on our relationships with those who make their way in to the body of Christ, whether they be saint, stranger, or in general ... Paul also focuses on our relationships with others.

Picking up in verse 14, Paul says, “Bless those who persecute you; bless them and do not persecute them.”

Verse 15, “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.”

Verse 16, “Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are.”

Verse 17, “Do not repay evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.”

Verse 18, “If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”

Verse 19, “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’

Verse 20, “If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink.”

Verse 21, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

These are not easy for even us in the church – and they are even less indicative of the so-called “Christian” nation we live in. Do not repay evil for evil, but let God be the one to avenge? Associate with the lowly, do not claim to be wiser than you are? Live peaceably with all? If your enemies are hungry, feed them and give them drink if they are thirsty? Bless those who persecute you? What crazy person living in the 21st Century Western World would think this is the right way of living?

See, I don’t know exactly what was going on in the first century church ... I’m not sure exactly what was happening in the midst of Paul’s early church plants ... but this kind of instruction just seems like meddling. This seems like the kind of meddling that would get one fired from the White House today. No one likes to be told that they have to show the kind of love we reserve for our friends and family to those we consider enemies. No one wants to extend self-suppressing humility to those who persecute us. No one wants to leave up to God the wrath we feel we deserve to offer in vengeance.

And yet, as Paul is offering this theological treatise, there is a foundational lining that claims who we are as the church – who we are as God’s people – who we are as the Body of Christ. Do you perceive it?

In the midst of this passage, from 9-21, Paul is laying out a clear understanding of what authentic community looks like. And yes, it looks quite different than the world we live in today – I think we’ve already named, we have essential work still to be done.

The eternal intent of God for creation is full on *shalom*. The hope of God for all of creation is peace and well-being. And yes, God’s intent is for this *shalom*, this well-being, this whole-ness to be available, received, and lived out by *all* people.

Our work as the church, our call as God's people, it's not just to feed those who are hungry – it's to help those who are hungry live into the fullness of authentic community that cares for the needs of each person. If food is a need, we provide food, because without food, they cannot live fully into their God-given created identity.

Our work as the church, our call as God's people, it's not just to extend equity those who are persecuted – it's to help those who are persecuted live into the fullness of authentic community that cares for the needs of each person. If equity is a need, we provide equity, because without equity, they cannot live fully into their God-given created identity.

Our work as the church, our call as God's people, it's not just to extend love those who are our enemies – it's to help those who are our enemies live into the fullness of authentic community that cares for the needs of each person. If love is a need, we provide love, because without love, they cannot live fully into their God-given created identity.

See, at the core of who we are as the church is God's hope and desire for each person to live into the fullness of their God-given created identity. We don't help people because they have needs, we don't love people because they lack love, we don't pity people because they are pitiful ... we work as God's people to allow every created being to live out a life that is worthy of their God-given created identity. The *shalom* of authentic community is the greatest need in our world, because it is authentic community through which God's love is best made known to one another.

God's desire for the world is not that a few succeed, while the many suffer. God's desire is for us all to thrive as one body, as one people, as one creation who live and love in a peaceable union. This was not the world before COVID-19, and it is not the world today. So yes, we have work to do, *essential* work to do, and it does not take our gathering in this building to do that work. But it is necessary and essential work.

As we begin this series, we're asking the question, what makes us the church? It is first and foremost a theological foundational that declares in the image of God the worth of all persons – the beauty of all of creation – and the promise that God is still leading us to make holy love known to all the world, that each and every person might live a life worthy of their God-created identity. For the glory of God, may we continue to endeavor on, that God's love might be made known. Amen.

ⁱ Paul Achtemeier. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, Romans*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

ⁱⁱ Sarah Heaner Lancaster. *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible, Romans*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015.