



Deering Community Church

Pastor: Barbara Luckett Currie

What Are We to Do?

Communion Reflection for 9-4-11

Scripture: Romans 12:9-18; 13:8-10; Matthew 18:15-20

What are we to do? Sometimes the New Testament sounds like a self-help book: do this, do that, don't do this or that! Paul is especially known for giving advice to the followers. Listen as I read parts of the Roman scriptures from Eugene Petersen's *The Message*, first from chapter 12:

“Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it. Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle. ...Don't quit in hard times; pray all the harder. Help needy Christians; be inventive in hospitality. Bless your enemies, no cursing under your breath. Laugh with your happy friends when they're happy; share tears when they're down. ...Don't hit back; discover beauty in everyone. Don't insist on getting even; that's not for you to do. ..Our Scriptures tell us that if you see your enemy hungry, go buy that person lunch, or he's thirsty, get him a drink. Your generosity will surprise him with goodness.”

And then from chapter 13: “Don't run up debts, except for the huge debt of love you owe each other. When you love others, you complete what the law has been after all along. The law code—don't sleep with another person's spouse, don't take someone's life, don't take what isn't yours, don't always be wanting what you don't have, and any other “don't” you can think of—finally adds up to this: Love other people as well as you do yourself. You can't go wrong when you love others. When you add up everything in the law code, the sum total is love.”

Is there any doubt what we are called to do? Love, love, love! Just think if we treated our enemies as the scripture dictates—giving them food instead of bombing them, giving drink to the thirsty instead of striking them down, and so forth. It would probably confuse and confound them. It might even lead to transformation, a change in them as we let the Spirit work through us. Instead we so often follow the world's way by striking back and calling that necessary for “justice”.

Yes, you and I are called to love each other, even those we don't like. This is not the kind of Eros love we have for our intimates; it is agape love, a selfless love. To love someone is not just being nice to them or catering to their likes and dislike. Loving is acting toward others in ways that help them experience some of God's goodness. It's not easy. Remember we don't have to invite them over for dinner or go to the movies with them. Thank goodness! It's hard enough to love those distant enemies such as Al Qaeda, and it is ever so much harder to love and bless someone



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who has personally done us wrong or threatened to harm us. To me loving in the way Jesus describes is doing whatever we can so that others can experience God, who is for me the big LOVE. This love that Paul is describing to the early Christian community in Rome as well as to us today is a love that is humble, an attitude that does not insist that our way is superior. It is a love that is authentic, genuine and unconditional—a love that is God. If all the Senators and Representatives in Congress who say they are Christian would take this reading of Paul and let it guide them, what a different political climate we would have today.

In our gospel lesson in Matthew, we have what many of us preachers find to be a very difficult passage. There's plenty of doubt that these words were spoken by Jesus instead of being added by the author of Matthew. One writer says, 'it's difficulty lies in the undoubted fact that it does not ring true; it does not sound like Jesus; it sounds more like the regulation of a church committee.'¹ Furthermore Jesus wouldn't have used the word church as there was no church at that time. What seemed especially strange to me was the way tax-collectors and Gentiles were considered outsiders when we know that Jesus never spoke of them like that; rather he most often referred to them with sympathy, love and sometimes even praise.

The part of this gospel lesson that does ring true for me is the need for reconciliation. This passage is talking about conflict inside the house of faith when someone has hurt you or is doing things damaging for the whole community: some examples might be gossip—saying unfair things behind your back, embarrassing you in public, stealing, to name a few. We are told to first go to the person and let him or her know that you have been hurt or taken advantage of. This is not a time to blame or take your anger out. The reason for the confrontation is to repair the hurt and alienation.

What if you don't get anywhere? The Message translates: "If he won't listen, take one or two others along so that the presence of witnesses will keep things honest and try again." I would hope the pastor might be part of this group. If that does not work, the passage goes on recommending that he or she be brought up in front of the church, and if he or she continues to disregard what is being said, let him be to you like a Gentile/heathen or a tax collector—a person of disrepute. This last advice is not what I would suggest. I would go back to Paul's advice and continue loving rather than judging. In the 13th chapter of Romans, Paul sums up the commandments with an obligation to love. He says that all the commandments are summed up in this sentence, "Love your neighbor as yourself." He further points out that love does no wrong to another; therefore, it is the fulfilling of the law. By

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this point the accused may not want to continue with the church. If what is happening is truly being destructive to the congregation, it might be necessary to ask the person to discontinue coming; however, I would hope someone, maybe the pastor, would be willing to keep in touch, sharing concern and compassion for him or her.

Sometimes the hardest of all to love is the person in your own family or congregation. Yet I'm pretty sure, based on examples of Jesus in the gospels, that Jesus would continue loving and reaching out to the person with compassion and forgiveness. And of course all through this difficult time we need to pray for understanding and reconciliation. This is a prayer most important. We need to pray this prayer not only for those close to us that are difficult or hurtful, but also for those on the national and world scene.

Let me share one last point on this process in Matthew. The Rev. Alyce McKenzie articulates this so well, I want to quote her: "I am troubled by the arrogance that never doubts that if I'm miffed with someone, they're in the wrong. The repeated visits to the "offender" could be seen, not as loving persistence, but as harassment and bullying". She is also disturbed by "the seemingly blanket assurance of divine support of human decisions (18:19)." My church family, I hope we all remember to be humble and seek the truth with patience and good will. In the end it is up to God to judge, not us. We are told that where two or three are gathered in Jesus name, he will be there among us. Let's make sure we take the time to listen to him. One other thing I ask of you, if there is conflict in our congregation, please let me know. You are a people that are independent and seldom bother your pastor with anything. In my opinion letting me know about conflict comes right after letting me know if anyone is having a crisis due to physical or mental problems, relationship difficulties, dire financial problems, as well as the spiritual realm. I am here for you. May you feel God's love through me and through each other. Love others as God loves you. Blessings on you all, Amen.