

Romans 12:9-21 Pastor Bill Uetricht 11 Pentecost 8/28/11

What if? What if what we say is true about life and God and the church **is** true? What if indeed God **is** compassionate, that love **is** at the center of what life means? What does life look like when the love that gives us our worth as a gift and unites us with others runs the show? How do we characterize the life of a community of faith that is overwhelmed by the love that we experience in Jesus Christ?

These questions, it seems to me, are what Paul is addressing in our second lesson for today from Romans. He has spent eleven chapters mapping out his theological perspectives, building his theological case. And the case looks something like this: All people are sinners—Jewish people and everybody else. There is no one who is righteous, not even one. And all of our attempts to become righteous, even the attempts that come from the Jewish law, are futile. God in Christ has brought to us a new righteousness—the righteousness of faith. Trust in God’s gift of love and compassion in Christ crucified is what makes us righteous. Sharing that trust is what creates the church, a community of diverse people and gifts.

Let me try my words to describe Paul’s theological case. All of us are messed up. All of our attempts to discover what life is all about, to prove our meaning and our worth, are useless. Life, true life, is to be discovered in the gift of God, not in anything we do. True life, love is discovered even in the midst of life’s messiness. As we focus our lives on Christ and him crucified, we meet a God who loves even and especially messed up people. And this God brings these messed up people into a community where their unique gifts are welcome. The bottom line about life, Paul is saying, is a love and compassion that sees everyone as having a part to play.

That's Paul's case. And now today, he says, "therefore." He claims that communities that believe that case, that trust the overwhelming love of God experienced in Christ, have a certain shape. They look a certain way. People within them behave in a certain way. They behave in a certain way not only in the midst of their community, but in relationship to the community beyond themselves, in relationship to their enemies, in relationship to the whole world. Listen to how Paul describes that certain way.

"Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection, [outdoing] one another in showing honor." A community marked by the love and compassion discovered in Christ will be characterized by real love, love that is not a show, love that is not fake, but genuine, authentic love that will focus on what builds others up, not tears them down. It will be a love that is about mutuality, about give and take. There will be no room for exploitation of any kind or shaming behavior in this community. This will not be a community characterized by power struggles. It will be a community characterized by honor that is given to all.

That honor will be a matter of zeal. "Do not lag in zeal," Paul says, "Be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer." A community of faith that is characterized by the overwhelming love of God that makes room for the gifts of all will be a community that is ardent about the way others are treated. We will be zealous in wanting people to be recipients of our affection. And we will do that as a matter of serving the Lord. Our affection will not simply be about how much personal warmth we can muster up for people whom perhaps we don't like, but will be about

our commitment to the Lord of love. It will be a matter of our discipleship.

And what's more, our discipleship in the context of a community characterized by love will not be an experience of drudgery. Communities shaped by love will be communities of hope. They will be communities where suffering, while acknowledged and given its appropriate due, will not in the end be what we are all about. Let's face it. Some people like to live in a sense of hopelessness. Some people want to grovel in their suffering. Some people want to be victims. It's easier than having to get off the couch. Sometimes the couch is darn-right comfortable. A community characterized by the overwhelming love of God in Christ will not be a community shaped by neediness or sadness. Sure, we will uphold people in their adversity. We will weep with those who weep. But adversity will not define us. We are a people of hope, nurtured by a life of prayer, a life that is fed, nourished by our connection to the God of compassion and love.

This nourishment will naturally take us beyond ourselves, our own little communities. Paul says, "Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers." A community that is centered on the overwhelming love of God in Christ is a community that will not be satisfied to take care of "just our own." Those overwhelmed by love will "contribute to the needs of the saints," will focus on how we can care for those who are beyond our back door, beyond our circle of friends, beyond our local congregation. We will give not only our concern but our money.

Perhaps you know that our congregation commits ten percent of its general fund income to the extended church. It's not usual for people when money gets tight to suggest that we decrease those gifts,

do away with them. After all, who knows what they do with that money? And what's more, we don't have control over it when it leaves our hands. Life lived in light of the overwhelming compassion of our God is life that lets go of control, life that has a big enough view of the world to inspire our concern for more than just us.

We who are overwhelmed by the compassion of our God for the world will give . . . to the extended church, to Lutheran Social Services, to Family Promise, to efforts that alleviate hunger and take care of the stranger. For a community marked by compassion and love, hospitality for the stranger will be at the heart and soul of who we are. That's why we Lutherans for so long have been involved in work with refugees and immigrants. Care for the stranger is at the center of what compassion and love mean. Communities that are shaped by the gospel of Jesus Christ cannot be communities preoccupied only with our own.

And they cannot be communities that are preoccupied just with the people we like. And here comes the really tough stuff. Listen to what Paul says: "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God." A community overwhelmed by the compassion of our God will not write off even our enemies. Life for us will not be about tit for tat, making sure that other people get exactly, if not more, of what they gave to us. William Loader says that violence has this way of sucking us into violence. It can make people its disciples, which means that the violence never comes to an end.

A couple of days ago I was having an email conversation with a couple of people who had obvious power needs. They wanted to show me who was in control. I responded with an email that tried to take

back some of that power. I would let *them* know that I had some power, too, and I wasn't going to cow tow to their little power games. You know what they did then? They responded with a little more power. My playing the little power game sure worked, didn't it? Power mania went on and on and on. Communities and individuals in those communities that are characterized by the love of God that *gives* us our worth and *gives* us our status choose to get outside of the non-ending cycle of power and the violence that accompanies it. We are not responsible to make sure that other people get what they deserve. As Paul says, we need to make room for God to do God's work. And what's more, we are not responsible for how people react to us. We have to leave room for people to do their own work. It may not be possible to live peaceably with everyone. But we will do *our* part to make that peace possible. We will be responsible to bless and love, living in harmony with one another, recognizing that sometimes we may not be as wise as we think we are.

Now that blessing and that loving—and I am not sure that this is Paul at his best here—may end up being a matter of “heaping burning coals on their heads.” On the one hand, that sounds a little like revenge to me. Yet on the other hand, maybe it reflects truth. Love and care can change people, even if it leads them to guilt first. Maybe overwhelming love will cause us to examine our lack of love, our movement to violence and power.

Jesus speaks the tough stuff today: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Those who are overwhelmed by the love and compassion of the one heading to the cross do the tough stuff of living love, of moving beyond the self to serve the world—the world close to home and the

world far away. What we say is true about life is true: God is loving and compassionate. The cross is the sure sign. Communities that trust that live cross-shaped lives of compassion and love.