

HUMBLE and KIND

Romans 12:9-21

September 10, 2017

Paul writes:

Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle.

Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant. 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. Get along with each other; don't be stuck-up. Make friends with nobodies; don't be the great somebody.

Don't hit back; discover beauty in everyone. If you've got it in you, get along with everybody. Don't insist on getting even; that's not for you to do. "I'll do the judging," says God. "I'll take care of it."

Our Scriptures tell us that if you see your enemy hungry, go buy that person lunch, or if he's thirsty, get him a drink. Your generosity will surprise him with goodness. Don't let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good.

I have put into your bulletins a blank piece of paper. This is what I would like you to do. While Steve plays a little on his guitar, about a minute's worth, I would like you to think of two words that

describe you. Just two. We are all complicated individuals, and we can use many words to describe us at any given intersection of our lives. Today, take yourself as you are—at face value—and write down the two words that pop into your head first. Don't overthink it. When you are through, fold your paper in the middle like this, and pass it to the center aisle for the Deacons to collect and bring forward. Your words will be part of our offering to God for the day.

Two words. Two impressions. Two descriptions. It's hard to know what to say today. It seems as though our entire country is either on fire or under water. What a scary and eerie week it has been. From our orange skies that signal the fires ravaging our sister forests to the posts and texts from persons suffering and enduring the biggest hurricane storms to hit our shores in recorded history, I can't remember feeling this vulnerable as a people since the 9/11 attacks.

We watch the news and we shake our heads and we say desperate prayers into the void. Is anyone listening out there? God, are you still tuned in? Those of us with family directly in harm's way ramp up our prayers, making them more specific, perhaps, and wring our hands, for there is nothing we can do to stop Irma, just like last week when we could not stop Harvey. We eagerly await news from the

affected regions. Politicians have finally taken a back seat to other, more pressing stories. I just wish that news didn't involve such tragedies.

Yet, baseball games and football games are played, picnics and weddings go forward as planned, and "America's Got Talent" gives us a much-needed respite from all the bad. As the fires burn and the sea walls cave, life in the rest of America goes on. It feels so strange to be here in Parker where all seems quiet and rather non-newsy.

The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Roman church written near the end of his ministry, is responding to some situation presented to him by the church elders. Unfortunately, when we read Paul's letters, we only get to hear one side of the conversation. The precipitating communication to him from his church is lost to history, so we can only guess what was brought to Paul's attention, to what crisis Paul was addressing his letter. The last of his certifiable and available letters, *Romans* gives us insight into the trials and tribulations of the early Christian tradition.

In circumstances of great stress, in a time when the world was seemingly falling apart, the fledgling Christian churches were holding on by a thread. Their members were getting restless, waiting for Jesus to return and take up the sword for them against Rome. The

world—not just the church-- was falling apart for the remnant Christians who lived in the hope that their Messiah Jesus was going to walk in again through their doorway any day. Kind of like this week, when I caught myself hoping for salvation for our southern coastal states. Maybe the hurricane will lose strength. Maybe it will veer off at the last minute and stall out harmlessly over the Atlantic Ocean. Maybe. Just maybe Salvation will walk in through the doorway. Afterall, this IS America, God's country.

I don't know about you all, but I suspect I am not the only one here who has lived through a hurricane before. Or a tornado. Or a major earthquake. When I was in Boston for college, there was a Category 4 hurricane that slammed into the city. I had been visiting friends in the heart of Boston that weekend and I was stuck there as the storm bore down on us. We boarded up the windows, one ear on the wind outside and one ear to the transistor radio broadcast, the only connection we had to "Storm Central."

We brought blankets and pillows and couch pillows to put over us into the hallway of the brownstone apartment, grabbed a flashlight and some water, and hunkered down through the still and silent night, waiting, waiting for hell to visit us. And visit us it did. I remember being absolutely terrified as the wind began to build, competing for our

attention with the warning sirens going off all over the area. The walls shook and groaned; the apartment building was three stories high and over 100 years old and it swayed with the wind.

We could hear glass breaking out of car windows and bedroom windows all the way down the street. We prayed. I didn't even know what I prayed, but I never prayed so hard in all my life. I had no spit in my mouth. My stomach was in knots. I clung to my friends, a big Korean college student and a husky Irishman who pretended not to be scared for my sake. I thought it would never end; I thought morning would never come.

And then there was the damage. I remember walking the streets of Boston's Boylston District after the storm, mouth agape, unable to speak at all, so moved was I by the devastation, yes, but also by how close I had come to real personal tragedy. I will never forget that 24- hour experience.

I know my story is not that unique. My brother, who awaits his fate today in Orlando, texted me that this was his 15th hurricane—Fifteenth. "Man, it gets old," he wrote me. My sweet Lord. How does he and his wife do it?

I'll tell you one thing: living through the wrath of the weather gods makes one very humble. When you are confronted with the forces of nature gone crazy, when all your sophistication, communication devices, planning, and community infrastructure cannot and does not save you from disaster, you realize just how insignificant you are in the universe.

A favorite passage from Stephen Crane's *The Open Boat*, comes to me now:

When it occurs to a man that nature does not regard him as important, and she feels she would not maim the universe by disposing of him, he at first wishes to throw bricks at the temple, and he hates deeply the fact that there are no bricks and no temples. Any visible expression of nature would surely be pelleted with his jeers.

There are no bricks and there are no temples. I think this is what Paul was trying to say to his fledgling churches in Rome. He was telling them to be humble before God and to be kind to one another. He was taking all the complications of church life lived in very stressful circumstances, and he was boiling it all down to two simple propositions: be humble and be kind.

When Paul said something like, "Love from the center of who you are," I think he was reminding his Roman church family to live within the heart of God, to live in humble celebration that they were *claimed*, that we are *all claimed* by an almighty force of Love. When he wrote something like, "Make friends with nobodies; don't be the great somebody," I think he was showing them how to live a humble life in the light of the Christ, for that's what Jesus did—he befriended the nobodies; he did not even succumb to his press notices. It was never about him.

When Paul told his churches something like, "if you see your enemy hungry, go buy that person lunch, or if he's thirsty, get him a drink," I think he is calling us all to a higher spiritual discipline of kindness. Being kind isn't easy, especially with our enemies, but it is the Jesus way and therefore, as Christians, it must be our way, too. There's far too much demonizing going on in this country today; there's way too little kindness being displayed, especially to those who disagree with us.

And now we have these storms and we have these fires and we have these floods and we have these massive losses and losses of human and animal and natural life. It's time to come together as a nation; it's time to be humble and kind. It's time to let our Dreamers live their dream and our children have a future that is not mired in

uncivility-- name-calling, and power-grabbing in the name either of political righteousness or religious privilege.

That's what Paul was saying. 2000 years ago, he was exhorting his flock to live a higher calling, by a higher moral code. That's what Jesus said before him when he exhorted *his* flock to live a life worthy of God's love. That's what he said to the people on the hillside when he called the people to love one another as they loved themselves. That's what we Christians must say and be today: humble and kind. We must be neighbors now. We must put our differences aside and help our neighbors now.

You are about to hear JJ sing for you Tim McGraw's interpretation of this passage. See if this doesn't sound like Paul:

Hold the door, say please, say thank you;
don't steal, don't cheat, and don't lie.
I know you got mountains to climb, but
always stay humble and kind.

When the dreams you're dreaming come to you;
when the work you put in is realized,
let yourself feel the pride, but
always stay humble and kind.

What were the two words you wrote about yourself? Do they fairly characterize you? Are they important? Well, of course they are important, because they are about you, but in the great scheme of things, are they an expression of "love from the center of who you are?" Let's take a look at how we view ourselves...

Paul wrote about being humble and kind, two qualities he didn't seem to display all that often. By all accounts, Paul was arrogant and demanding. In his mind and heart, he was divinely called to spread Christianity all over Asia Minor and the Roman Empire. His Damascus Road experience, when the living Christ appeared to him in a vision and called him directly as his apostle and spokesperson, gave him a pride that was in competition with the spiritual discipline of humility. And Paul had no time or inclination to be kind. Kissing babies and escorting old ladies across the street was not in his portfolio of either his makeup or his mission.

Paul's was an urgent message. I always rather picture him as a circus clown riding a unicycle around his rings, juggling all the church balls up in the air, trying not to let any of them drop. I always picture him as a kind of desperate man, filled with the Holy Spirit and pushed into the fires and the hurricanes of a time in history that in many ways was not ready for him.

Like Paul or not, grateful we should all be for him, for without his ministry—his urgency, we would not know Christ and we would not have our church family, a family we have grown to know and love, a family that is growing as new people, spiritually-hungry people, are finding their way to us.

Be humble and be kind. The type of love Paul describes here is not as passive as it sounds. Rather, the 'humble and kind' kind of love he describes is both energetic and optimistic, countercultural in its application. In a society such as ours where competition is so popular, the competition to honor one another would not even make the list. And that's why it is a spiritual *discipline*.

'Second fiddle' is not what society values; you have to be first chair.

"Blessing the enemy" is not what we hear in our society these days; we curse our enemies and we personally attack everyone who supports what or who we have demonized. Our enemies belong to another church or another faith. They belong to another same race. They belong to the other gender. Our enemies display different faces, but all belong to the large class of "Them," not "Us."

We know very well, as we are very practiced, in facing off against our enemies. We can be nasty and obscene on Facebook, hurling personal insults the way of those with whom we disagree. Lots of people do it; what's the harm? We can fire off angry texts to those with whom we have a personal disagreement. It's immediate. It's effective. Why not? He sent one to me first!

We can listen to commentators on the TV and the radio who increase their ratings by ratcheting up the rancor. We can do this; it's become so popular in our society that it feels almost like second nature now.

Or we can say no. We can say, "enough already." We can reclaim Christianity from the Christians who would hold our faith close to their white, straight, wealthy, exclusionary selves. We can follow the way of Jesus instead. We can be humble and kind. We can be humble and kind. We can reclaim Christianity by being humble and kind.

We can adopt what Tracy Kidder calls, in his book, *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, "a hermeneutic of generosity." When we evaluate people's actions with a hermeneutic of generosity, we assume their motives are good, even if at first blush, one might suspect the opposite. That's a tough act. That's a hard spiritual discipline to follow. Paul's way is hard.

This weekend, as we watch what will be happening to our Southeastern states, when we smell the smoke from the fires in the West and Northwest, and when we see the pictures on our screens about the cleanup efforts in the South, let's be neighbors. Let's be American neighbors, because Americans come together in times of crisis. Let's be Christians, because Christians should extend our hand to our sisters and brothers who are hurting. They may be our friends. They may be our enemies. They may be unknown to us and so we don't know whether they are our friends or not. But they are the children of God, and so they are our family.

We will continue to take donations all this year for the UCC Disaster Ministries. One hundred percent of all donations will go to those in need in affected areas. The UCC pays its administrative costs for Disaster Ministries from a separate budget. Mark your check or envelope "disaster ministries" and we will make sure your donation gets where it needs to go.

Let's show our love from the center of who we are. Humble and kind. Humble, because it could easily have been us this time, and kind, because that is who we are as Christians. *May It Be So.*