

“Mr. Wendal 2.0” - Sermon on Romans 12:9-21

Max Michaels

I would argue that there are not many more passages throughout the Bible that just get straight to the point. Paul tells it like it is and what you should be doing as clearly as can be. Much like a parent chastising you after you did something wrong Paul comes in strong with verses such as “Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good;” (v.9), “Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer;” (v.12), & “extend hospitality to strangers” (v.13) setting the record straight for what a Christian community should look like. The opening verses may be simple but rich with essential practices. If this passage is so simple and direct, why is it so difficult then? Well, that is also simple; it's because genuine love is, in all honesty, radical. Finding such love is rare, and it is impossible to fake. Whether in this church, in the world, or at home, when you find genuine love in your life, wherever it may be, it is something you cherish. It is similar to the love God has for each of us; regardless of who we are, regardless of what we have done, we are all given God's love freely. Despite this love freely given to us, we are hesitant to share it with those even within our community, let alone those within the scope of our ministries. It is possibly a byproduct of our upbringing. Something out of our control. As Paul asks the Roman community to do in this passage, it is hard to break ties to the ways others around us, a culture that would see us stand against one another rather than alongside, are doing things. The world outside of the Christian community can be cruel; even within some communities of faith, it can also be cruel. However, that is why this passage exists because if there should be one place where we should not be at each other throats, it should be here. Jesus presents what it may look like to prefer helping someone else above oneself and gives concrete evidence of boundary-crossing love toward one's adversary. What distinguishes Paul's

illustration of the life of the reconciled and reconciling community is not novelty but the motivating event that gives it life: that being the self-giving love of God expressed in the self-sacrifice of Jesus. The practice of self-outpouring by which the community has been formed becomes the signature practice of the community as it commends its message of divine reconciliation that overcomes deadly hate in the wider world.¹ ***In a world demanding that we conform to its ways, we are called to be different so that we can be authentic to our calling through living up to our identity and mission.***

Paul boils down what it means to be a Christian for us in the opening of this Romans passage. “Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good.” (v.9). It is a clear command, yet challenging for us to follow. When we often build up these walls to keep people out so we do not get hurt, it is no surprise why it is difficult to follow. When the larger culture surrounding us asks us to look away from those in need, turn our back on those less fortunate than ourselves, and deny Christ, yes, this is a challenging command to follow. I’ll give an example. I recall the first class I attended in Seminary right after my undergrad. It was Hebrew, and some students who were about to start their second or third year of Seminary came up to greet me. Now, I came directly from a larger university, and even though we would have class sizes of around 100 to 200 or more, it was not common to talk to the people around you. You just didn’t do it. If you have been to a college campus recently, most people walk around with headphones in and heads down on their phones. I am sure that not much has changed in the five years since I have been on a college campus, and I will say I was equally guilty of this practice. Maybe too guilty of this practice. So when these three people came up to introduce themselves, I can not even begin to express how tense I probably looked. I just remember having one

¹ Connections, 273.

headphone in, staring at the hand extended out to shake mine for a solid couple of seconds. And as you know, a few seconds can feel like an eternity when there is that awkward silence. I do not know who was more uncomfortable, the nice gentleman just trying to greet the new student or me, who was probably thinking I was about to get jumped in the middle of Hebrew 101. The culture of a loving community in education was so uncommon to me that it took me quite a while to warm up to others. I remember thinking to myself, do I open up to these strangers, here feeling called to do the same thing that I feel called to do and face potential rejection, or do I keep to myself and push along alone? It was all so foreign to me, opening up to others and sharing concerns and difficulties over a language at which only one of us was good at. In this class, I made friends who helped me feel welcomed in Seminary. Word of advice if you ever find yourselves in a Hebrew 101 class, I can promise you that the other students are not going to jump you during introductions by the coffee maker. This type of hospitality between the staff and students was scary at first but became refreshing.

I wish I had read these opening verses before that first Hebrew class because while this opening is fantastic and gets right to the point about what we should be doing and how we should live our lives as Christians in community, it does not stand alone. There are the following verses, verses 14 through 21, and the omitted section directly preceding this reading. What these readings got me thinking about was the purpose of this almost direct language in the Bible was. Paul's letter to the congregation in Romans shares a much different language than we are used to seeing and hearing. Paul is addressing these principles or reminding the Roman community of them because there clearly are some problems. Paul, who my New Testament professor often described as "the first Pastor," comes into this conflict and emphasizes the need for authentic love as a concrete practice, not just abstract words. In the following verses of 14 through 21, we

see Paul focusing on the church's responsibility for meeting one another's concrete needs.² The community addressed in this passage has succumbed to the dominant culture and has lost sight of its identity as an alternative community. This is where the passage transcends its meaning for just the Roman community because these are problems any church can find itself repeating. Churches can be led to confuse worship with marketing techniques, stewardship with fund-raising, spirituality with meditation techniques, vitality with growth, and ministry with programs and services.³ While programs and services are good, they can often become the tail that wags the dog. Instead, what a church has to offer is an invitation to a new community, a new way of being, that nurtures believers to live differently and to live out their calling within the faith community and the wider society. What is central here is identity and mission. That is what separates us from others, what separates us from the other denominations, and what makes First Presbyterian Church, what makes all of you unique. It is a life, a community, living out its calling through the power of the Spirit. But what is this life that is lived differently through the Spirit? A life lived differently is not different from this life here; instead, the power of the Holy Spirit makes our life here different. A life that is lived in the spirit of the crucified and risen Christ does not abolish bodiliness; it is a life renewed for eternal living.⁴

Being authentic to our identity and calling as Christians is difficult; however, nobody said it would be easy. Living up to this Christian covenant that Paul lays out for us takes work. It is easy to give into the societal pressures of hating one another, buying into the divisiveness of what surrounds us, and bringing that into our workplaces and this building. We stop looking at each other as community members and instead as numbers. Where we start interacting with

² Connections, 274.

³ Feasting on the Word, year A, volume 4, 16.

⁴ Feasting on the Word, 18.

everybody in ways that do not embody the radical ways of hospitality we are called to live into. For several weeks, First Pres has been highlighting the “Faces of First” through its social media accounts, with several people sharing their stories about the church, what brought them here, and what keeps them coming. Stories that do embody what a church community is supposed to be. I remember when I first came to Fort Wayne to visit First Pres with my wife. I can remember how many of y’all welcomed us that first month we were here, and I can remember Annie giving us a tour around this church. Honestly, when I first arrived here, this space was intimidating. Not to mention that those first couple of worship services I participated in were not pretty, so I thank y’all for going easy on me when I first started. By extension, I must thank Todd, our theatre director, for helping me get more comfortable in this space so I would not wear out your hospitality. There was so much welcoming to my wife and me that we were able to adjust quite well before your “mild” winter. From Pastor Carrie decorating my office when my birthday rolled around to the many times I have felt welcomed by both staff and members, included in committees or programming there are many examples of this hospitality being extended here. Hospitality is a distinctive mark of the church, which was born out of hospitality and spread because of hospitality. However, hospitality does not mean simply welcoming newcomers into our congregations and doing charitable acts, important as they are. Hospitality must move beyond an act of charity to hospitality as an act of justice. Hospitality as charity offers crumbs from our tables, whereas hospitality as justice offers a place at the table. In the world that we live in, where we have to exist in a predatory global market benefitting from the misfortune of many, hospitality involves transforming this system that is inhospitable to many. So, in this way of looking at it, in a way that acknowledges that in the spirit of the reformation, hospitality is the practice by which the church stands or falls.

However, and I must ask this of you, is this what the identity and mission of First Pres is? Are we always a welcoming community in our identity and mission? Do we embrace hospitality as more than welcoming those who enter the door? One of the questions Pastor Annie had me reflect on a few months back, when we talked about what it means to be a Pastor. She asked me to reflect on if a church were to go away, who would know and care that it was gone? Would the person who receives food notice if the church was gone one day? These guiding questions were for me to think about a church's purpose as I prepare for the next steps. Or, another way to put it, what would be its enduring legacy? Would we be missed? Would the food banks we support miss First Pres, or would they only miss the donations? Whether it be this community in Rome that Paul is addressing, a small church in a small town rural America, or a big church in a downtown in the Midwest, these guiding questions help us imagine what is vital for us as a community of believers. What about our hospitality makes us special, and what would Fort Wayne miss if we were gone? What comes to my mind is all the various mission programs that assist all the non-profit organizations throughout Fort Wayne and Allen County. Or the Social Justice team's consistent fight in opposing the creation of a new jail. Or the welcoming presence of Pastor Carrie and the Ambassador team with the work they do here at the church and outside to the community of Fort Wayne. On days like this, I am thankful for a passage such as this. It makes me reflect on all the great work this body of believers sets itself out to do in this community. We weren't called to be reactionary Christians, responding and conforming to the world around us; we must be more than that. The forces of reaction will do everything within their means to prevent us from living differently and carrying out our ministry of radical hospitality. In a world that spits out hate against people who do not conform to the ways things have always been done, we are supposed to be different. For it is said: "Do not repay anyone evil

for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceable with all.” (v.17-18). How do we want to be remembered when we think about our legacy? I would like to be remembered as someone who gave it his all until the very end. Someone who worked to ensure we could help as many people as possible before I called it quits. So I will make this request of you when you think about how you want this church, how you want your faith to be remembered. Let your love be genuine, create a space where hospitality is more than welcoming people as they come in but one that goes beyond and instead makes it your identity, and always hold fast to what is good. **Amen.**