

August 30, 2020

Romans 12:9-21

In the invitation email you received, inviting you to this virtual worship service, not only was the bulletin for this service attached, but also today's scripture passage – in fact, there are two translations of the same passage. I included the scripture lesson because this is one of the most important passages in the Bible. In these 13 verses Paul lays out how we are to live in community. Now, his words don't replace the 10 Commandments, but they explain what the Commandments look like, when they are lived out.

What we learn from Paul is church is not about doctrines and liturgies, rules and regulations. Christianity is a way of life. We practice our faith not as a religion, but as a relationship – with God, with one another, with all of creation. A relationship that creates community.

In these troubling and divisive times there is a real fear about the health and well-being of our country and our community. One of the things we here at Amicable Church strive to do is be an open and welcoming community by listening, respectfully, to those we disagree with in order to build bridges over the deep divisions in our world. Paul has written a laundry list, if you will, of what we must do, if we are going to live into a vibrant, wholesome, healing, relational community.

Let's look at the list:

“Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good;”

This means to love one another as God loves us – unconditionally; a love, which desires that others attain their God-given potential. It also means that we are to be honest with one another. There will be days when we do not feel so loving towards people, especially people we disagree with. We must recognize this as a part of life, but not wallow in it or be accusatory toward those we might disagree with.

Anything that turns us away from God's love is evil; anything that breaks or harms a community or any interaction that cause another harm is evil. Hate it; avoid this evil at all costs. Anything that

strengthens our relationship with another person, and with God, is good. Practice it.

“Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.”

Affection and honor require true respect for other people. It is important to be aware of the other's strengths and weaknesses. We must support the strengths and not abuse or take advantage of another's weaknesses. Mutual affection and honor are the outward signs of respect, and respect is the cornerstone of any community.

“Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.”

You can learn spiritual truths in the unlikeliest of places. While sitting in the dental chair someone told me that we embody God's Trinity, when we make God an active part of any relationship or community – the Other, myself, and God. The only way I can maintain “zeal” and an “ardent spirit” is when I remember God's presence and my call to “serve the Lord.” So, we must never forget to make God a part of all our interactions with others.

“Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.”

No matter how hard we try, none of us is perfect. We all make mistakes. Through the rough times, through times of tragedy, we must hold on to and rejoice in God's presence – in and through the power of love and of life. It is what will keep us and our community alive. When we are suffering, we must be patient, trusting in the power of love and never underestimating the power of prayer to help us persevere.

“Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.”

If our community is to deepen and grow, we must look beyond ourselves. It is when we live in an open and welcoming community that we will find nourishment for body and spirit. It is when we are willing to reach outside of ourselves and offer help and support to people in need that we will find and know healing and wholeness in our own lives. It is in the welcoming of friends and strangers into our community that a healthy community is created.

“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.”

This is not an acceptance of persecution. In fact, it is a rejection of persecution. To **not** bless is to put ourselves on the level of those who persecute, those we oppose, we despise. When we seek to bless, we are changed; our eyes are opened; our blinders are removed and we are open to the possibility of renewed community.

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

In the oneness of creation we are part of the Holy One. This oneness is all about the interconnectedness of all life and our interdependence on all of creation. Since, in our oneness, others are a part of me and I a part of them, how can we help but rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep? We are in this together.

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

The word “humility” sums this up. Paul’s statement here says it all. All I would add to “wiser than you are” is we must not to think of ourselves as better than someone else.

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

In today’s political climate it is easy to get caught up in a tit-for-tat escalation. The divide is so deep and wide we must work hard to listen carefully and without judgment. And our words must lift up rather than tear down.

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

This is not so easy, if you think everyone else around you are “idiots!” You get my (and Paul’s) point here. Humility helps. Kindness helps. Thinking before speaking helps. Peace begins with ourselves.

‘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.’”

Ah, but be honest now, vengeance can feel so good, especially in the planning stage, in one’s imagination. Rarely does the actual act

feel redeeming, though. If our focus is on vengeance, there is no room in our minds or hearts for love.

“No, ‘if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.’”

You have to smile, don’t you? For it is here that we, with a smile on our faces, serve our finest soup to our worst enemy, and then sit back and enjoy their bewilderment and frustration. But we must not be kind to those we dislike just to make them uncomfortable or put them at a disadvantage or shamed. All that we do should be done to glorify God. Caring for our “enemies” is how we build bridges to a just peace.

Finally, **“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”**

This is the summation of it all. You do this – “overcoming evil with good” – by doing all of the above things Paul listed. It is sort of like the quote from Augustine: “Love God, and do what you will.” But, it has to be done in that order.

Friends, Jesus was not interested in reforming the rituals of his faith. Jesus was interested in showing people a way of life that would bring healing and hope to them, as individuals, as a community, as part of creation. He knew life was relational.

As I lifted up last Sunday, all of life is sacred. Paul, in his list of how to live in community, is calling us to live in the awareness of life’s sacredness. When we try to live as Paul has outlined, we and the world will be changed, transformed and made whole by God, who is love.

May God grant us, the members and friends of Amicable Church, the courage, strength, and wisdom to continue to live into this relational community, continue to strive to build bridges of understanding, for then we and the world around us will surely know God’s peace. Amen.