

July 22, 2018  
9<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Pentecost

# Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Back to Basics”

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Note: During our summer series, "Word," members of the Covenant family will choose a scripture passage and share how it has been or become God's Word for them.

Romans 12:9-18

9 Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; 10 love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. 11 Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.\* 12 Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. 13 Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. 14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. 16 Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly;\* do not claim to be wiser than you are. 17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. 18 If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Reflection by: Bill Braun

Romans 12:9-18 is one of the verses that Cathy and I selected for our wedding. We found in this verse a way to see each other, honor each other, respect each other, understand each other, and communicate with each other. It has served us well.

It would have been hard to imagine then that 19 years later these verses would be a painful lament in my struggle to find forgiveness for a premeditated and self-justified breach of honor and trust, by people who, by their own words and declarations, claim to know and be better, and routinely demand that others live by their dictums.

Lewis Smedes was a professor of theology and ethics at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, CA. He wrote the book, *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts, We Don't Deserve*.

Smedes encourages us to understand that hurtful and noxious behavior is the visible manifestation of neediness and weakness. And in so doing, he sets up a distinction: we can cultivate our willingness to forgive persons while remaining resolute in holding them to account for their behavior.

So what guidance does Romans 12: 9-18 provide for finding one's way to forgiveness?

I took each verse separately, and truth be told, I found in each one a lot to work with. I saw an implicit invitation to step back, to consider that I am as flawed as others are, to move to higher ground, and forgive. But I returned again and again to one verse - "Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all."

To be noble is to be admirable in dignity of conception. I looked within to ask, "And if I had acted in a like-type manner, what forgiveness would I hope or ask for, and what would I be willing to do to set things right?"

If I wanted forgiveness for pain and hurt I had caused, there are some actions I should be willing to take: to name the offending behavior; to see my behavior through the eyes of the persons I hurt. To be able to describe the pain I caused; to confess to the act; to offer atonement and restitution, and to promise to do better in the future.

Bible verses, I have found, don't show up the same way every time, nor are they easy to digest platitudes. Sometimes, heavy lifting is involved

### ***Back to Basics***

In his novel, *A Gentleman in Moscow*, author Amor Towles writes:

*When one experiences a profound setback in the course of an enviable life, one has a variety of options. Spurred by shame, One may attempt to hide all evidence of the change in one's circumstances. Thus, the merchant who gambles away his savings will hold on to his finer suits until they fray, and tell anecdotes from the halls of the private clubs where his membership has long since lapsed. In a state of self-pity, one may retreat from the world in which one has been blessed to live. Thus, the long-suffering husband, finally disgraced by his wife in society, may be the one who leaves his home in exchange for a small, dark apartment on the other side of town. Or...one may simply join the Confederacy of the Humbled.*

*Like the Freemasons, the Confederacy of the Humbled is a close-knit brotherhood whose members travel with no outward markings, but who know each other at a glance.*

*For having fallen suddenly from grace,  
those in the Confederacy share a certain perspective.  
Knowing beauty, influence, fame, and privilege to be borrowed  
rather than bestowed, they are not easily impressed.  
They are not quick to envy or take offense.  
They certainly do not scour the papers in search of their own names.  
They remain committed to living among their peers,  
but they greet adulation with caution,  
ambition with sympathy,  
and condescension with an inward smile.<sup>1</sup>*

Based on the passage we just heard from Paul's letter to the Romans, we can safely assume the apostle Paul was a member of the Confederacy of the Humbled. Perhaps this was because of Paul – back when he was Saul was such a zealous persecutor of the first Jesus followers, who experienced a dramatic transformation when the risen Jesus confronted him on the Damascus Road. Once Paul joins this new movement, he is a changed man one who not only knows the breadth and depth of God's love but who is on a mission to share it with the world. For Paul, who did so much to create and shape the very first churches, Christians are not just members of the Confederacy of the Humbled; we are baptized into a community defined by and grounded in love. For Paul, churches are meant to be Communities of the Beloved those who love one another and who share that love with the world.

Last week at the Chautauqua Institution, I had the joy and the privilege of hearing sermons every day from Father Gregory Boyle, the Jesuit priest who started Homeboy Industries, the largest rehabilitation ministry to gang members in the world. I also had the opportunity to meet a couple of the former gang members Boyle had brought with him to Chautauqua men and women he calls homies.

During a sudden and torrential rainstorm, a colleague and I ended up taking shelter with a few of them under an overhang, and we struck up a conversation with a Homegirl named Dani. I told Dani my husband, and I had visited Homeboy a few years ago and had lunch at the Homegirl Café.

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<sup>1</sup> Amor Towles, *A Gentleman in Moscow*. Viking, 2016.

I asked her what she thought of Chautauqua. "Well," she said, "I've never been anywhere like this. You have to scan your ticket to get in *and* to get out. And they call it an institution this is not like any institution I've ever been in!"

The next day I went to a gathering where two Homeboys, Marcos and Jason, told their stories, which were strikingly similar both were born into poverty, grew up without fathers, dropped out of elementary school to join gangs, and ended up in prison not long after fathering children of their own.

In time, they had their own Damascus Road experience when they discovered Homeboy and met Father G (as they call him). Instead of the shame and violence that defines gang life, at Homeboy, Marcos and Jason discovered a kind of unconditional love and support they had never known before. At Homeboy they got jobs, earned their GEDs, and worked side by side with former rivals. In other words, they joined the Confederacy of the Humbled and became members of a Community of the Beloved. Jason shared that coming to Chautauqua was the third time he'd traveled with Father G. The first time was to a juvenile detention center. "It was hard," Jason said, "because I had been there myself and I knew exactly what their lives were like. I wanted to help them change. But before we went in Father G said, 'Now we're not going to go in here and scare them straight. We're going to scare them straight. We're just going to love them.'" And that, it turns out, is enough, more than enough, to turn someone's life completely around.

In this passage from Romans, Paul reminds us that, because of the extraordinary love God has for each one of us, we are called to be a people whose lives and actions are defined by love.

Love for one another.

Love for the stranger.

Love for the outcast.

Love for the enemy, as well as for the friend.

According to Paul, this place called church, where the people who gather know the depth of God's love and claim the promise of this love, the church, and its members are the Community of the Beloved. And in this community...

We will not judge.

We will not write off.

We will not condemn.

We will not name call.

We will not cast out.

We will not separate.

We will not attack.

We will not stand over.

We will *love*.<sup>2</sup>

We will love, not only because it is the right thing to do, but because through God's love revealed in Jesus we have learned that only love has the power to transform the world, one person, and one relationship, at a time. Of course, the world tells us that it isn't love that changes people. The world tells us that we must use discipline, punishment, consequence, rewards, shows of strength, and displays of power to enact change. People will constantly make a case for anything but love, but that is only because they have yet to know how loved they are. As Paul teaches, once we truly receive God's love for us, we cannot help but share that good news with others all others because we know firsthand the transformative power of love.

Leftie was a Homeboy, who endured an unbelievably horrific childhood. Once, his drug-addicted mother dropped him and his brother off at his grandmother's apartment and didn't come back. During the year that followed, whenever the boys weren't in school, which was every afternoon and every weekend, their grandmother would make them sit cross-legged in the hallway and cover their mouths with duct tape, because, she told them, "I hate the sound of your voices."

Leftie has come a long way since then, and his time at Homeboy with Father G has helped him heal. He is now the proud father of three daughters, and when he speaks, he makes sure to tell his audience that he never shushes them, because he loves the sound of their voices. Not long ago, his four-year-old daughter got a crayon and drew all over one of the walls in their apartment. Leftie's wife sent him to discipline her. He went into the room where she had done the deed, turned his daughter to face the wall she had colored on, kneeled down beside her and put his arm around her, touching his cheek to her cheek. "Look at what you did," he said. "That is a magnificent work of art."

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<sup>2</sup> For this list, I am indebted to a sermon on this text by the Rev. Derek Starr Redwine, delivered at Fairmount Presbyterian Church, June 3, 2018. Used with permission.

Leftie possessed the hard-earned knowledge that this is how God loves us. Our God loves the sound of our voices and sees our lives even our misguided attempts and ill-advised choices as magnificent works of art.

Paul invites us into the Community of the Beloved, where this kind of love motivates people; which is not primarily a feeling or an emotion, but a commitment to be in a relationship with people, all people, in a way that mirrors God's relationship with us. Over and over again in his letters, Paul teaches that God's love, made tangible in Jesus, is the most powerful force in the world because only love can name what is true and look beyond judgment to find a solution, only love creates a level playing field where real dialogue is possible, only love enables us to put the needs of others above our own; only love has the power to transform.

Even those of us who did not grow up in poverty or violence or abuse need reminders of the love God has for us love that cannot be earned or deserved, which also means it cannot be lost or taken away. In a world where we are taught that there is not enough of anything to go around, and where we must earn our place and hold onto it with everything we've got, God's love is utterly and radically different, for God's love for us is unconditional, all-encompassing, and never-ending.

When we grasp the truth of this love, then we might have a chance at following Paul's wisdom to:

*Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good;  
love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.  
Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.  
Contribute to the needs of the saints;  
extend hospitality to strangers.  
Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.  
Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.  
Live in harmony with one another;  
do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly;  
do not claim to be wiser than you are.  
To not repay anyone evil for evil,  
but to take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.*

*To, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.*

May we joyfully accept our membership into the Confederacy of the humbled and the Community of the Beloved, so that we may learn to see ourselves and everyone else, with all of our idiosyncrasies and shortcomings, as God's magnificent works of art, trusting that the love God pours into us can and will overflow beyond us, to one another and to all the world.

Amen.