

Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost, Year A  
 September 3, 2017  
 Creating Community  
 Central Presbyterian Church, Montclair  
 David Noble

*Romans 12:9-21*

<sup>9</sup>Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; <sup>10</sup>love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. <sup>11</sup>Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. <sup>12</sup>Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. <sup>13</sup>Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. <sup>14</sup>Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. <sup>15</sup>Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. <sup>16</sup>Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. <sup>17</sup>Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. <sup>18</sup>If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. <sup>19</sup>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." <sup>20</sup>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." <sup>21</sup>Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

After reading that, I'm tired! Paul goes on a tear here describing a bunch of things we ought to do. There are 24 imperatives in this little paragraph, 24 instructions on what it means to live the Christian life.

That's either a 2 hour sermon or a year's worth of preaching! Don't worry.

Paul starts with instructions for our internal, personal, private lives- be ardent in spirit, rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer, hate what is evil. He describes our spiritual posture as Christians. He wants us to be strong in our trusting relationship with God.

But after a few words on our internal spiritual life, Paul takes three times as much space to describe something else about faith. See if you can hear it. Paul says, "Extend hospitality, rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep, live in harmony, forgive, and on and on he goes.

Paul is getting down to "brass tacks", he measuring out what faithful life looks like. He is underlining what he said a few paragraphs before. "This is the spiritual life," he is saying. When we put our bodies on the line to love the unlovely, to forgive, to make peace, to honor and give dignity to each other—when we put our bodies on the line to do these things and many others, this is our "spiritual worship." It's not just in our heads or our hearts, actually, it is also in our hands and feet and on our tongues.

And I am fascinated how ¾ of Paul's instructions cannot be done by ourselves. They require a community. Our spiritual worship shows up in how we live out our relationships with one another and with the world.

For most of this letter Paul has reminded the house churches in Rome that God loves them. That God's mercy has brought them close to God and to each other. God's mercy is necessary before we can embrace Paul's instructions on how to live our Christian lives.

We are brought to God by God's mercy. We are brought to one another by God's mercy. In the case of the Roman Christians, God has brought together Jews who have become Christ followers as well as Gentiles who have become Christ followers- two groups that would have never been found together if not for God's mercy. And now Paul tells them how to love each other in certain ways-

In your church, he says,  
 hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good;  
 love one another with mutual affection;  
 outdo one another in showing honor.  
 contribute to the needs of the saints (among you);  
 extend hospitality to strangers who come to you.

This is the different kind of community you are to be, he says- loving, honoring, helping, welcoming- together.

In language we hear all the time today, Paul is challenging his churches to show the world what bipartisan support looks like. Jews and Gentiles living together. Who would have thought? Loving each other, honoring each other, helping each other, despite their deep, deep differences. That's the kind of alternative community God is looking for in every congregation. God's mercy and a new way of living create the community God is seeking. In this particular case, bipartisan love and honor and help and witness.

Here at Central we are not bipartisan, we are multipartisan. We have more variety, more diversity than Paul or his churches could imagine. And we are called to do the same things with each other- welcome, love, honor, help as equals.

This summer I've been loving the opportunity to worship here in the chapel. I feel close to you. I can talk with you and you can hear each other's voices singing and praying and asking for prayer. The choir doesn't need to turn around to encourage you- here in this place you take your rightful place as the choir being assisted by your friends.

Over the last two months many of you have told me how this place has helped you feel a deeper sense of community, of belonging. Hearing each other share our prayer requests we have been able to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. We have been more able to welcome those who visit and help them feel loved and accepted. In here we actually make a place for them among us, not in a side pew in the back by themselves. Here in this place there has been a different kind of emphasis on love and welcome and honor and help.

This is what many of you have told me this summer.

I've also heard from some of you, who have been here a couple of years, that when you first worshiped here it was in this chapel. And you felt then a sense of warmth and love and community and belonging. You tell me that if you had worshiped in the sanctuary instead, the first time, you would have probably not returned, because, while it is a beautiful place, it does not foster community nearly as well. Truth is, we have quite a few visitors over the course of each year, and most do not come back, and we suspect it is (at least partly) because our worship space is not helping us like it used to in years past.

You are loving people who do honor each other and lift each other up and welcome strangers, but it is very hard in our lovely sanctuary to do what we do best as we have been experiencing here in this room.

Something needs to change. The world around us already is. People today are looking for community, the kind of community that is warm and close, where you can see each other, and not just the backs of the heads in front of you, but really see each other, and worship together. Sitting in long straight rows to watch a worship leader in action is no longer helpful. People want to hear each other's voices, touch each other's hands (up to a point), and be part of something that the world cannot seem to create- a diverse human community that loves and honors and welcomes and respects.

Those of us who have been here for several years or decades, have had the opportunity to form a community together. We love each other, we care, we help, but strangers who meet us over in the sanctuary don't see that when we are so spread out over so much space.

Consider a team of players, let's say basketball or soccer players. They have their individual jobs in the game, but after every basket or goal they come together to slap hands, look each other in the eye, and smile—they are creating community in their team.

How about 400 pound football players who hold hands in the huddle. Never would have happened 40 years ago. They are creating what they call a team, but what is really a community.

Every Tuesday morning here at the church there is a staff meeting. We don't sit in our individual offices and do it by phone or by Skype—we get together at a table where we can see and hear, close enough to touch each other.

Put on your creative thinking caps. What have you experienced here? How did it feel? What made it possible? How can we use the sanctuary to give us a better chance to share it there?

I talked with Renita Weber this past week. She is the chair of the worship committee. I told her I have been receiving comments all summer and I want her and her worship committee to hear them and talk about them and consider your creative ideas for shaping community in worship that brings us together in faithful ways.

She expects to hear from you. This would be a good week to do that. Those of you who have spoken with me and have submitted plans on how we can do this, please contact Renita. If you want to send your thoughts and ideas to me I will forward them to her. I hope we can be more intentional this fall in how we live our life on Sunday mornings as God's new community that welcomes, and loves, and rejoices and weeps, together.

I said at the beginning how many sermons there are in this little paragraph from Paul's letter. I haven't even touched on how all these instructions from Paul relate to our life out in the world—how we forgive and love and make peace. I know you pretty well. I know you desire to do those things. And it isn't easy in a world where nations brag about their nuclear capability, and people line up to cheer the exclusion of people not like themselves.

All the more reason to have this place to come back to every Sunday to experience again what community is meant to be. Let's think about how to do that together in a space that needs some thoughtful, creative, intentional adjustments to help us practice the art of belonging -- in God's mercy.