

A Strange Way to Live

Prayer of Illumination

Present God,
Settle our hearts.
Still our minds.
And stir our imaginations,
That we might hear your Word for us this day. Amen.

Romans 12:9-21

Our scripture reading this morning comes from the twelfth chapter of Romans, where Paul offers a series of instructions for life together. It is also one of the passages Pastor Jenny invited our confirmands to read together last weekend on their opening retreat.

Let us listen now for God's word to us in this time and in this place:

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. Do not lag in zeal; be ardent in spirit; serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction; persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; pursue 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 arrogant, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. 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 peaceably with all.

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." Instead, "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." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

A Strange Way to Live

Some of my favorite novels are the ones where strangers become family—where unlikely characters find one another and become integral parts of one another's lives. It is, I suspect, a large part of why I loved the TV show *Ted Lasso*. If you're not familiar, the show follows an American football coach who accepts a job as the head coach of a professional British soccer team despite knowing nothing about soccer. The implausibility of the premise is matched only by the excessive earnestness of the main character, whose sincerity and relentless cheerfulness can make it hard to take him seriously.

And yet, over the course of three seasons, a community is formed and people begin to change. Not just the main character, Ted, but the owner who hired him because she wanted him to fail, the grumpy, aging team captain, the insecure equipment manager, the privileged, self-obsessed star of the team. People who began as rivals become friends. Men who would never admit they were scared or lonely or hurting start telling one another the truth about themselves. People fail without becoming defined by their failures. They forgive one another without forgetting what has happened. They challenge one another, carry one another. They become a community, a family—one the viewer can't help but want to be a part of.

Because who doesn't want to live in a world where someone always sees the best in you? Where you are forgiven when you fail or fall short? Where people rally around you when something goes wrong, accept you for who you are, and inspire you to become a better version of yourself because that's what they see in you?

Of course, it isn't real. The community that is created, the obstacles that are overcome, the failures that are forgiven, the people that are changed—that all happens because writers believed it would further a storyline. We might watch *Ted Lasso* and envy the community the show creates, but at the end of the night, when the TV goes off, those kinds of communities—the ones where you are accepted just as you are, where you become your best self through the love and support of others—those kinds of communities feel few and far between.

Except.

Several years ago I listened to a podcast called *Dolly Parton's America*. The entire podcast centered around the ways in which Dolly Parton seemed able to transcend the politically and socially divisive times in which we live. She was beloved in rural Appalachia and also in Hollywood, among conservative Christians as well as in the LGBTQ community. She had an ability to occupy spaces that increasingly had very little room for one another. Somehow, people who could barely stand to be in the same room with one another all found something to love in Dolly—making her concerts one of the few places in America where people who might otherwise see one another as enemies could stand shoulder to shoulder and sing together.

In many ways, Dolly was a real-life Ted Lasso. Her public persona was so heightened that it was tempting to write her off as a caricature. But Dolly was not one to underestimate. What was particularly fascinating about the podcast, and about Dolly herself, was that she achieved such a beloved status despite saying and doing things that she knew might offend segments of her audience. She was known for embracing the LGBTQ community, saying “I hope that everybody gets a chance to be who and what they are.” In 2018, after learning that the term ‘Dixie’ was offensive to people, she removed it from the name of one of her tourist attractions, saying, “I didn’t understand; now I do; if it’s hurting people, let’s change it.” In 2020, at the height of the Black Lives Matter protests, Dolly gave an interview in which she said, “Of course Black lives matter. Do we think our little white lives are the only ones that matter?”—I’m cleaning up her language a little for church.

In a country as divided as ours, there was something remarkable about Dolly’s ability to appeal to people across political and social divides.

But, then, loving Dolly is easier than loving one another.

And the fact that people on opposite sides of almost every imaginable divide could agree on Dolly did not make those divides disappear. It didn’t resolve the objections people had to one another. Singing with one another is sweet, but it doesn’t tell us what to do when someone we know posts something harmful on social media, when a coworker uses language that demeans a particular group of people, or when someone we care about is being treated unjustly.

Which brings us back to our scripture passage for this morning and Paul’s instructions to let love be genuine, hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good.

Let love be genuine. ... Hate what is evil.

Genuine love, according to Paul, requires us to hate what is evil. It doesn’t ask us to pretend that the things dividing us don’t matter, or that standing shoulder to shoulder for a song somehow makes everything all right. Genuine love has to be able to name what is wrong and resist what causes harm. It does not require us to soften our judgment about harm in order to preserve relationships or social peace, and it certainly does not require us to remain in abusive relationships. But naming something as wrong does not give us permission to respond however we want.

Hate what is evil, Paul writes. But bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.

Hate what is evil. But do not repay anyone evil for evil.

Hate what is evil. But never avenge yourself.

Hate what is evil. But if your enemies are hungry, feed them. If they are thirsty, give them something to drink.

Hate what is evil. But do not be overcome by evil. Instead, overcome evil with good.

Genuine love doesn't require us to paper over our differences or minimize harm that is being done. But neither does it allow evil to teach us how to live.

Which means that someone else's willingness to humiliate another person does not give us permission to humiliate that person in return. The fact that someone has made an enemy of us does not mean we are allowed to make an enemy of them. Just because someone else is cruel, that doesn't mean our cruelty is righteous. Contempt does not justify contempt.

To say that living in such a way is not easy may be one of the great understatements of the Christian faith.

Which makes it important to remember that Paul isn't writing these words to an individual. He's writing to a church, a community. Because this isn't a way of life that any of us can sustain alone. It's too easy to get wrapped up in the ways of the world. It's too easy to return hate for hate, scorn for scorn, disregard for disregard. It is too easy to think that if something is evil, anything we do in response is automatically good.

Let love be genuine.

Hate what is evil.

Hold fast to what is good.

Love one another.

Outdo one another in showing honor.

Do not lag in zeal.

Be ardent in spirit.

Serve the Lord.

Rejoice in hope.

Be patient in affliction.

Persevere in prayer.

Contribute.

Pursue hospitality.

Bless those who persecute you.

Do not curse them.

Rejoice and weep with others.

Live in harmony.

Do not be arrogant.

Associate with the lowly.

Do not claim to be wiser than you are.

Do not repay evil with evil.

Take thought for what is noble.

Live peaceably with all.

Never avenge yourselves.

Feed your enemies.

Give them something to drink.

Overcome evil with good.

That's 28 directives by my count. Some of them are easy enough when life is going well—it's not difficult to rejoice with someone we love or show hospitality to someone we're glad to welcome. But Paul is describing a way of life meant to hold even when love gets hard—when we're angry, when we've been hurt, when we're convinced someone else is wrong. And none of us can sustain that way of life alone.

We need one another—to call each other back, to forgive one another, to hold each other accountable, to remind one another of who God calls us to be. It's part of what makes this such a good passage for Confirmation. Because Confirmation isn't about answering all the questions or figuring out exactly what you believe. It's about making a choice—a choice about the kind of person you want to become. A choice about the way you want to live. And a choice about the people with whom you want to practice becoming that person. Because we cannot be the people God calls us to be, alone.

Which means that those of us who have already made that choice have a responsibility to show our children and youth what it looks like—what it looks like to hold fast to what is good, to hate what is evil while also blessing those who persecute us. Because long before our youth decide if they want to be confirmed, they are watching us. They are learning from us what this way of life looks like. They are watching us rejoice with people who rejoice and weep with people who weep. They are watching us welcome strangers and care for one another. And they are watching what we do when love gets harder—when we disagree, when someone causes harm, when we are angry, when we encounter something we believe is wrong.

It is a strange way to live: to name evil without allowing it to teach us how to respond. To resist what is wrong without becoming what we hate. To believe that cruelty does not justify cruelty, that contempt does not justify contempt, that even when someone makes an enemy of us, we do not have permission to make an enemy of them.

And we will not always get it right.

But together, we can practice.

We can practice genuine love. We can help one another hold fast to what is good. We can call one another back when we forget. We can remind one another who we are trying to become.

Because choosing a community like this one means choosing the people with whom we want to practice becoming the people God calls us to be.