

“A PECULIAR ETHIC”

Romans 12:9-21

Sermon by Mack Dennis, Senior Pastor

It's been more than a year now, and I have yet to preach a sermon series. I am generally hesitant to do series for a number of reasons, but mainly because they tend to have a confining, limiting effect on the wild and free Word of God. The living Word resists categories, lists, bullet-points, and the like. So, though this will be a series, there is only one theme. Each sermon this month will be a variation on the meaning of church as the *extraordinary* community. This is a very “gospel” word, because it highlights the character of God and the character of God's people—a people called out, chosen, holy, royal, as 1 Peter says (2:9). This follows on my continuous search for a unifying language we can all share together, which I hope will illuminate our identity as a church, and give birth to new dreams and visions, as the season of Pentecost promises will happen if we are faithful.

This word “extraordinary” is, itself, rooted in the gospel, specifically the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus calls the church to love its enemies. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, writes a chapter on this one word, *extraordinary*, as it relates to enemy-love. “If you love those who love you, what's so extraordinary about that?” The church is the community that makes this peculiar ethic visible in the world.

We should see our Romans text for today as an illumination of Jesus' command to love enemies in the Sermon on the Mount. At the height of his theological acumen, Paul gives us these “marks of the true Christian.” If you read them all at once, you might notice how each sentence and phrase calls the church to do something very out of the ordinary, against our natural instincts. The full effect of the text is that if the confessing community takes these seriously, they will function in the world as the body of him who said, Love your enemies. Put simply, if the command to love enemies is too abstract for us, Paul brings it into sharp, practical relief. Jesus says to the disciples, “Love with an extraordinary love.” Paul says to us today, “Here's precisely how to do that.”

First, we are to let love be genuine, sincere. Christian love should stand out for its purity, integrity. We are to abhor evil by—as the NRSV translation says—“holding fast” to what is good. This “holding fast” comes from the same word we hear associated in the scriptures with marriage. As those married “cleave” to one another and become one flesh, we are to “cleave” to love, becoming one with it. Those who don't follow Jesus should be able to look at us and see a striking resemblance to the one to whom we've been “cleaved.” It is a very earthy, bodily image Paul gives us—to be glued to God's goodness in the flesh, fused with it, living inseparably from it. We *stand out* because God's love is in us without admixture.

In the same way, we're called to outdo one another with honor. Think of two runners in the final stretch of a race, spending the last of their energy as they lunge across the finish line, bowing their heads into the tape in order to outdo the other at the last possible second. Christians

are those who outdo, outrun, outpace one another in our speedy and diligent attempts to show God's love. If you've ever played a sport, probably you or at least one of your teammates could be counted on to leave everything on the field or the court, not because you were a brownnoser or because you were trying to get into the newspaper, but because you had a pure love of the game. It simply never crossed your mind to do otherwise.

To "rejoice in hope, to be patient in suffering, to persevere in prayer," each of these exhortations calls for an extraordinary ethic. To rejoice in hope is to hope with joy. To hope, by definition, is to *wait* for, *long* for, *yearn* for, something or someone we don't have. To hope, by definition, involves a recognition that we are lacking something. But to rejoice in lacking, in longing for? Strange. To be patient in suffering? No, we must speed through suffering. Get out of suffering as quickly as we can. Find a way. Google the answers, there must be an answer, a cure, a quick fix, but to be patient in suffering? Odd. To pray? Sure. We pray. But to persevere in prayer, even when prayers go unanswered? Out of the ordinary. *Extraordinary*.

"Contribute to the needs of the saints, and extend hospitality to strangers." Who are the saints? We are the saints. The saints in this sense are those called out, set apart, steeped in holiness, the people made peculiar in the world for being about God's business. So, Paul says, invest in the business of the saints. Saints have needs. Give to them. How much should we give? More than makes sense...unless Jesus has been raised from the dead.

Who are the strangers? They are those we wouldn't invite in our house *unless* Jesus has been raised from the dead.

"Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse them." It's as if walking through these exhortations takes us to stranger and stranger dimensions of reality that would be utterly impossible to do apart from the grace of the Risen Jesus. We have now entered territory that asks of us an ethic that is impossible to enact without God's help. In his commentary on this text, scholar Charles Talbert reminds us that the early Christians were unique in their unanimous conviction about loving enemies. Pagans were more often concerned with praising revenge. In the Old Testament, we see the Israelites pursue different solutions to enemies, from completely destroying them, to aiding them when they are in trouble. Paul does quote Proverbs to support his exhortation: "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." This, Paul says, is how we "overcome evil with good."

But what makes the Christian life exceptional is that there is no question for us. Loving enemies is not an abstract moral principle. It is central to our way of life.

"Don't repay anyone evil for evil..."

"Live peaceably with all..."

"Never avenge yourselves..."

There is a question to ponder, though: wouldn't dumping a bag of glowing Kingsford charcoal on our enemies be a strange way of blessing them? It doesn't help matters to know that the word for charcoal in the original language is the word from which we get *anthrax*.

How exactly are we supposed to pile burning coals on the heads of our enemies? May we look to the example of Fred Rogers, otherwise known as "Mr. Rogers." Before he was well-known, he went before the Senate subcommittee on communications, in order to make a plea for increased funding for public television. At first, the committee chairman, a Senator Pastore, is rude, even hostile, to Mr. Rogers. But as a Christian, and a Presbyterian minister, Mr. Rogers absorbs the blow, and, in his patient gentle way, makes his case. He explains his love for children, and how his television show operates, and how it is specifically designed to help children grow up to love others and themselves. As he talks, you can see the senator softening toward him. By the end of Mr. Rogers's testimony, the senator is deeply moved. He says to Mr. Rogers, "I think it's wonderful. I think it's *wonderful*...Looks like you just earned the \$20 million dollars."

Practically speaking, persecution is not always going to bring in \$20 million dollars. But, it will do this: if we embody this effort together, people who come to know us will give us complements like this, "Some unusual folks there at Five Oak. Strange congregation. Odd people." By which they will mean, "What an extraordinary church."