

Romans 12:9-21  
September 3, 2017

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ! Amen.

At the most recent Annual Synod Assembly I was in a break-out session pertaining to becoming a resilient leader in turbulent times. Those gathered were primarily clergy; however, there were also some lay voting members present – leaders in their own right by being the voices of the congregation at this annual event as congregations of the Southeastern Iowa Synod gather to be church together. Anyway, the impetus of the presentation was focusing on who we are as leaders. What are our gifts? What qualities has God bestowed upon us that will anchor us when we encounter obstacles, turbulence, turmoil, confrontation, and quite simply the lure of the enemy to turn us from following the call to serve Jesus Christ? While geared toward leaders in the church the presentation could just as easily be geared toward all who are disciples' of Christ trying to live faithfully in a world, society, and culture that at times beats to a different drum and challenges us to conform to it, what Paul lifted up in our text last week.

We were asked to identify our “islands of competence,” that is, those core strengths that ground us. Characteristics such as: empathy, generosity, courageous, loyal, even-tempered, intuitive, hospitable, focused, persistent,

brave, creative, tolerant, goal-oriented, just to name a few. By contemplating and identifying these we were then aware of those and fall back on those when faced with adversity. These are part of who we are.

Secondly, we were tasked with identifying those things that help us refocus our energy and regain perspective from a holistic standpoint. Something that keep us physically active such as walking, running, yoga, etc. Next, was to name something that keeps us emotionally grounded such as seeking out professional counseling in the midst of stress, pain, or whatever it is we are dealing with or finding ample time for rest and relaxation. Finally, something that keeps us spiritually fed such as prayer, attending worship, being in the company of other brothers and sisters in Christ, seeking out a spiritual advisor, reading the Bible, being in tune with God's creation, etc. These, too, are identifying marks that help provide stability and renew our minds for the work God has called us to.

Lastly, we were to discuss or develop a smooth sailing strategy. That is, a mantra to repeat daily or however often we need in order to remind ourselves that we are resilient. Many of us already had those in place. Some used a familiar passage such as Psalm 46:10, "Be still and know that I am God." Others simply used a word such as peace, grace, or love. And many responses had to do with the fact we are God's. First and foremost in the midst of trials and

tribulations we are a precious son or daughter of the living God. In some essence it was simply a slight change to Psalm 46:10 in merely adding an “ ‘s ” to the end of God to make the mantra say, “Be still and know that I am God’s.” Because that’s our anchor. That’s our identity. No one can take that away.

Each time the church gathers we remember whose we are. We lift up the promise we are not alone. The Spirit plants our bearings in the abundance of God’s grace, mercy, love, and redemption. Shortly we will celebrate the sacrament of baptism as God welcomes Rayna into the body of Christ and marks her with the cross of Christ. A reminder of whose she is - a beloved daughter of the God who created her.

This is what Paul has been building up to. As we heard last week the first portion of Paul’s letter to the church in Rome was all about unpacking what God has done in Jesus Christ. He has been led by the Spirit to discern and deliver a message to the young church just what it means to live on the other side of Christ’s death and resurrection. How does all this transform them? Shape their lives? Renew their minds? Basically, the same question the church still asks today. How do we live out our faith? Faith that isn’t stagnant and simply a belief but rather faith that is ever on the move, growing, and yes, even at times struggling to believe. Faith that is a gift. Faith that goes beyond Sunday and into

every waking minute of our lives. Faith that guides and shapes our lives, our vocations, our relationships, and our decisions. Faith that gives us an anchor in the midst of turbulence. Faith in which the Holy Spirit anchors us in the promise we are God's.

This is what Paul has been building to. These early followers of Christ are just that. They are God's. They are joined to the Son of God, Jesus Christ, through the waters of baptism. Washed with the grace of God. Clothed in the garment of Christ's righteousness. Saved by the cross of Christ and his glorious resurrection. One with Christ and one with the body of Christ, which of course is the church. The communion of saints. The priesthood of all believers. Paul calls for lives that are the result of renewing minds responding to the mercies of God.

Hear again the list of ethical injunctions Paul lifts up: 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 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, do not repay

anyone with evil for evil, but that thought for what is noble in the sign of all, if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink and finally, do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. These are not a list of moral achievements, as so often is proclaimed from the pulpit, which then implies to the hearer that it's up to us to save ourselves by ourselves or to purify our inclinations so that we might be acceptable to God. That completely goes against the heart of Paul's theology; that we are saved by grace alone. The very essence of what renewed the minds of Luther and his fellow reformers 500 years ago and the church continues to cling to today when we approach the life-giving waters of baptism or the Holy Table of our Lord, in which we come as sinners in need of this divine grace and receive it freely, purely, unconditionally because of Jesus Christ.

For Paul these ethical injunctions flow naturally from an ethos that Christian living finds its source in the unbelievable outpouring of God's grace. They are the beautiful blossoms that spring forth from the seed sown, watered, and loved by the compassionate hands of the great Creator. This is who we are. The work of God's hands. People redeemed by the cross of Christ and the empty tomb of Easter. People loved by the Creator. People who live in the light of who, in Jesus Christ, we are. That living or doing, as the Reverend Will Willimon states,

“proceeds from the being.”<sup>i</sup> When we experience the true God in Jesus Christ and are overcome with that majestic grace the ensuing and enduring relationship is empowering. We who have been so graciously loved are those who are able to love others. We love not to get somewhere with God, but we love as those who, in Jesus Christ, have arrived. We were alienated from God (Romans 1) but now have been brought close.<sup>ii</sup> Brought close to God. Our anchor. Our source of life. Whose we are. Amen.

---

<sup>i</sup> Will Willimon, Will Willimon’s Pulpit Resource Vol. 45, No 3 Year A (Abingdon Press; Nashville, TN) p.30.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.