

Basking in Romans 12

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Romans is one of the New Testament books considered to be written by the “real Paul”. For some books of the Bible attributed to Paul, scholars are more uncertain about their authorship. Romans 12: 9-21 is one of this week’s Revised Common Lectionary readings. As I read from Romans 12, I suggest we try to let this scripture wash over us as Good News, not constrictive advice or demands but as vehicles for love, hope and joy. I am using the New Revised Standard Version of Romans 12: 9-21.

12:9 Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good;

12:10 Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.

12:11 Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.

12:12 Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.

12:13 Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

12:14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.

12:15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

12:16 Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are.

12:17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.

12:18 If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

12:19 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."

12:20 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."

12:21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

There is so much here to reflect on, but Verse 16 is one that stands out to me for understanding and reflection today: Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are.

Dr Walter Brueggemann, a contemporary American Protestant scholar and theologian, writes this: “In Romans 12:16 Paul wrote to the early church encouraging them to associate with the humble or humiliated. This process involved their “transformation by the renewal of their minds” (Rom 12:2). While

the Hebrew word used would have been traditionally understood to mean humble, its Hebrew roots suggest that the word represents a group who were afflicted and oppressed. In Roman society, there was distinction between the humbled and those who rated higher on the economic scale. While the Roman church consisted of diverse ethnic groups, there would have also been economic diversity. Those considered higher on the social scale would have viewed this challenge by the Apostle Paul, as a challenge to promote unity and maintain a safe environment. Paul guided the Roman Christians to develop connections through the use of what translates to “mental or emotional” words, spiritual giftedness and mercy, and relationships with the vulnerable members of the congregation. This was the “transformation by the renewal of your minds” that Paul speaks about.

For us here I think it means that we have an opportunity to create safe and sacred spaces ourselves, facilitate healing, unity, and mercy. I sense that this is happening in our church community but I for one feel invited to do a better job at doing my part in the process.

Dr. Brueggemann says this with respect to pastors: “Through victims’ stories, hospitality and acceptance, partnering with local agencies, and the power of the Sacred Texts, preaching can offer connection to our vulnerable members in the community as well as to those offering hope and healing to others. This diverse level of pastoral care provides a powerful witness to the healing power of the Spirit and the incarnation of Jesus”, he says

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That sounds like Rev. Harrison to me. I thank Dan for inviting us to engage together in envisioning the deconstruction of systemic racism. That is at the bleeding edge of National, even global crises today. Many of us are trying to respond deeply to Black Lives Matter. Also, to help meet this challenge, Dan has quickly built our technological social media structure in time to keep us connected during covid 19. In today’s world with the younger generation emerging, this is all a great gift to our community. On top of covid 19 he and we are experiencing outrageous and troubling political corruption and violence, propagated at the highest levels.

That was about pastors, but traditionally in our church we are all pastors or ministers in one way or another. We as a community are trying to be a safe place

for all. Nakesha was amazing last week. What a gift to be able to share so naturally and communicate in the way she does and through it, challenge us to help create the kind of community that Paul was talking about. She was manifesting a great ministry and challenge for us all.

Also last week, Mark noted how our church has inspired several missions that have resulted in organizations that helped Nakesha navigate her journey- like LCF and Shalom Apartments. Here is another example of another mission of our church: “Roman 12 Mission Group”, one reason I chose this scripture.

In September of 1975, Beth Mahler sounded the call for a Church of the Covenant Mission Group called “Romans 12”. Their mission was to enrich the worship of the church and to practice and promote intercessory prayer. They maintained a journal in the Chapel where people could write prayer concerns and they and others would drop in any time of day or night to engage in contemplative prayer and intercession for needs that had been logged in the journal.

Romans 12 Mission Group used their namesake scripture of Romans 12 as a focal point of their sharing with each other, discussing how they were doing at rejoicing with those who rejoice, weeping with those who weep, for example, or responding to other Romans 12 verses. The group of around 5 people continued for at least 4 years, as I can see from the online sermon tape archives, and the group overlapped in time with the City Gate Mission Group which addressed systemic change - especially in housing in the Lynchburg area. Romans 12 Group was one of the links in the journey of our church to this day. We may not be here today were it not for Romans 12 Mission Group and the sequence of events it led to - giving us the new spirit we have here right now. But isn't it going to be great to get through covid 19 and to have a good outcome November 3rd and January 20th?

I listened to the late Beth Mahler this week from a 1976 sermon archive tape. In that sermon she sounded the call, as we say, to the Roman 12 mission group. We had a more formulated pattern of worship and of Mission Groups then and the model is still there if we are led that way, but regardless of how we do it, many of us are called to Mission in some way, using our particular gifts and this is so exciting. There is a new spirit, new wonderful people joining us and the amazing Harrison family that God sent to join and lead us.

We are coming into our annual time of recommitment soon and some of us will be deciding whether and in what way we will participate in the church for the coming year. In preparation I invite you to, among other things, bask in Romans 12.

I'm going back to our astute friend Dr. Brueggemann again, and read a prayer of his inspired by Romans 12. It is from his book of prayers called *Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth*. Let's have an additional silence of 1 or 2 minutes and I will close my sharing time with his prayer entitled "Yes".