

The Church of the Pilgrimage  
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Romans 12:1-2;9-18

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, and faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

### **Depending On You**

In seminary we were taught not to use big seminary type words in sermons, and certainly not to begin a sermon in that fashion -- too academic, too dry -- but today I am going to break that rule.

In seminary, in learning about biblical interpretation we were encouraged to have a "hermeneutic of suspicion". Hermeneutic is a big fat seminary word, and it refers to the way we understand things, the lens through which we approach, explore, and analyze things. Our instructors were telling us, see, to be wary of what agenda a biblical interpreter might have – that is, we should wonder what power or privilege was possibly being protected or preserved as they put forth their interpretation of what the bible says. We all have our biases, our agendas -- the "hermeneutic of suspicion" reminded us of that.

This week, I heard a different phrase, much nicer: A "hermeneutic of generosity" – not something I learned in seminary, but something found in Tracy Kidder's book *Mountains beyond Mountains*, Tracy Kidder's profile of Dr. Paul Farmer. You may know of Farmer, and of this book. Paul Farmer is an anthropologist and medical doctor who travels the world establishing clinics to treat chronic diseases like tuberculosis in areas of severe poverty and inadequate health care, places like parts of Africa and the island nation of Haiti. As he does his humanitarian work, Farmer deals with medical establishment, various bureaucracies, local traditions. According to Kidder, his biographer, Farmer approaches all people with "a hermeneutic of

generosity" --which is to say he (quote) "evaluates other people's actions from an assumption that their motives are good even if, at first glance, one might suspect the opposite." (*Feasting on the Word, year A, vol 4, Rochelle Stackhouse, p. 16-17*)

Reading that this week, well, it was a wow. Probably because I could see how much this attitude, this way of approaching people went with our scripture for today, but also because I could see how important, and rare, this way of being is. We do not presently live in times when here in our country people assume the best about each other, where people take the time to learn, listen, and find what is noble in the other person, particularly if that person is "the stranger", or a member of a different political party for that matter. We do not live in times when the encouragement out there is to put a hermeneutic of generosity into action. Yet if we listen to Paul speaking to the Roman church, this is clearly what he suggests.

*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. Contribute to the needs of the saints, extend hospitality to strangers. Do not be haughty, do not claim to be wiser than you are.*

We should not assume that the church in Rome was plagued by conflict or dissension. I think we should just assume they were a church, which is to say a collection of human beings who were less than perfect and who were less than perfectly trying to be God's people together. We might also assume that they, like us, were part of a larger culture that gave them entirely different messages – not so very *Christian* messages -- about how to live.

Did you hear it in Lynnette's reading today? Where the surrounding culture says hold on, cling to whatever power, prestige, or big fat bank account you can accumulate the message here is *Hold Fast to What is Good* something that seems to speak of wisdom, and values and the things that make for the common good.

And where our culture says compete, win, prove yourself this message is *compete in honoring one another*. Rather than striving to be recognized and congratulated, we should put our effort, our best energies into thanking others, appreciating others, putting the praise spotlight on them. Imagine – it's the honoring one another Olympics and here in the church of Jesus Christ we are all working to reach the podium.

I have a story to tell, and it is on me. On the mission trip, I shared with the kids about Emmaline who is just a year shy of being of the age to go on a mission trip, I told them a bit about Emmaline and her health concerns. I had brought along a lot of small rocks, and I asked the kids if they might use these, so that rather than our making a paper get well card, they could offer prayers and hopes for her on these rocks, so these then would be something for her to take out and look at when she felt down or discouraged. The messages the kids wrote all seemed fine: "Hope" or "Healing" or "Love" they wrote. But someone had written "Just Keep swimming" on a

rock....and it seemed odd to me, maybe sort of flip, to write that to someone who had third degree burns on her skin, to someone who wouldn't be swimming or out in the sun anytime soon. Looking at that message, I felt a little angry, and I was tempted to pull that rock from the pile.

I realize now I should have asked the teenagers about it right then and there rather than waiting til I came home and sharing this with Jenny, our Christian education director. "Oh, that is from the movie Finding Nemo!" she said. "Just Keep swimming" is saying to Emma "Hang in there" and "Keep on keeping on".

It is so easy to misunderstand. To hear something the wrong way. Have you ever gotten caught like that, thinking something is all wrong when maybe it was better than all right, it was just that you didn't understand?

So the question for today is can we extend a "hermeneutic of generosity" to those both inside and outside the church? The person driving too slowly in front of us on the highway, The cashier at the supermarket, Our co-workers, Our classmates, Fellow church committee members, and members of our extended families?

Surely "outdo one another in honoring one another" is much more than a Hallmark card sentiment. It is demanding. It is hard work, because we have to check our own assumptions, and keep working to be open. This sort of Christian ethics is badly needed in our world today. I can, in fact, right now think of nothing more counter-cultural.

Sometime later this week, I suggest you take your bible out. Read this passage slowly to yourself. Call to mind the places where you are needing to give someone you know, (or perhaps a group of people in our society, or in our church) the benefit of the doubt. Remember that following Jesus isn't easy, but something that stretches us - again and again and again. Remember that we in the church are called to reflect this way of being.

There's one more thing to lift up about this passage, which interestingly enough has begun to be requested almost as much as First Corinthians 13 as a wedding scripture, no doubt because of its rich message about intentional living. It's this one line: If it is possible, *so far as it depends upon you*, Live peaceably with all. That bible line made it into *Desiderata*, that well known poem from the sixties offering encouragement about how to live. *So far as it depends upon you*.

Well it does depend upon you, upon us. The eyes through which we look at the world, and at each other can help make for peace, or heighten the tensions. And in these times, particularly in these times, We need that reminder. As the old hymn says Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me. In our desire to follow Jesus, may we never forget this prayer.

Amen.