



The Full Charge

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Romans 12:9-21

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 3, 2017

Opening Sentences: (Matthew 16.24-25)

Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

Introduction

This is Labor Day weekend—a federal holiday that “celebrates the American labor movement and the contributions that workers have made to the strength, prosperity, laws and well-being of the country.” That’s according to the formal description of the day. Few of us focus on that, but most of us know that the holiday celebrates work. It’s also the liturgical season of Pentecost, the season of the Spirit, and we focus on the dimensions of living our faith in the power of God’s spirit—the “work” of our faith, if you will. (Even our service today includes activity—we will celebrate the Lord’s Supper.) And, I think it’s interesting that the lectionary readings for today are all about behavior and action—and work. The Matthew passage has Jesus saying to the disciples: “If any want to become my followers, then deny yourself and take up your cross and follow me...”

The reading from Romans 12 picks up on last week’s reading about our common humanity and the gifts of the Spirit that are given to us by God for the common good and that all of our separate individual parts are meant to work together for the good of the whole community. Now, these verses today say: “Here’s how you do that.”

Scripture: Romans 12.9-21

⁹Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹²Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. ¹³Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. ¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. ¹⁷Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” ²⁰No, “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.” ²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Because sermons are prepared with an emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts may occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.

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The headline about the hurricane the other day said: “Crippled water system, chemical plant blaze, vivid examples of Harvey’s cascading effects.”

(Washington Post, September 1, 2017)

There are threats of E-coli and other water-borne diseases; toxic chemicals. There are tens of thousands of people in shelters; at least 197,000 homes damaged; enough rain in six days—27 trillion gallons—that could have supplied New York City for six decades; or just half of that total could have ended the California drought in just three days; and, at least 50 people have died.

huffingtonpost.com, August 31, 2017)

During this same week, the heavy monsoon rains have produced the worst floods to strike south Asia in years. In India, Bangladesh and Nepal more than 40 million people have been affected. In Mumbai, where 60% of its 20 million residents are in extreme poverty and up to 300,000 persons are homeless, the response system is overwhelmed and there are no services for those who were homeless before the flood. And across the region at least 1,200 people have died.

(The Guardian, August 30, September 1, 2017)

But, I was prompted to reflect on these water disasters by a story about Alan Kurdi, the three-year-old Syrian boy whose body washed ashore in Turkey, two years ago yesterday, September 2, 2015, and focused the world’s attention on the plight of refugees. Yet, in these two years, 8,500 more people have died in the Mediterranean...

refugees leaving Libya, Turkey or Morocco from a whole ring of countries from Afghanistan, Syria, South Sudan, Chad and Mali—and places in between.

(The Guardian, September 1, 2017)

8,500 lives; or 1,200, or 50 – all these lives in these water disasters are a metaphor for, and are connected to, all the pain, suffering, difficulty, danger, war, violence, racism, homelessness, unemployment of our world—the world into which we are called; into which we are charged each week to “go in peace; to have courage; to hold on to all that is good” Indeed, the world into which we are called to work for the common good.

The reading from Romans 12 this morning should sound familiar—“hold fast to what is good;” “outdo one another in showing honor;” “serve the Lord;” “Rejoice;” “Do not repay anyone evil for evil;” “live peaceably with all.” Six of the nine phrases in our charge are reflected in Romans 12—among the total of 23 or 24 or 28, depending on how you count them: declarations, instructions, *imperatives* for our lives, with the gifts of the Spirit, for the common good.

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It's "The Westminster Charge" on steroids. There's enough material here for a half-year-long weekly sermon series. We can call Romans 12 "The Full Charge."

There's some question about whether the author is speaking about relationships within the faith community or with those in the larger society. Usually commentators see the break from the "inside" to the "outside" at verse 17.

(This, by itself, prompts an interesting discussion—in verse 14 the apostle is saying "bless those who persecute you" to the *faith* community as a way of dealing with gossip and accusations among ourselves. *What are the implications of that?* Then he extends that principle after verse 17 to those who are not yet part of the congregation.)

At a minimum, I think these declarations are expectations for how we treat and serve *all* others. They are standards that help us monitor our own behavior as it relates to the rest of the world, certainly the rest of the *human* community.

Most of these instructions, like the six from our Westminster charge, are expressions that are familiar from throughout the scripture; most of them are what we would expect; many of them, while being contrasted to their opposites, are common sense, such as "do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly." I think the most interesting, and humbling—and incredibly valuable instruction is: "Do not claim to be wiser than you are." We express that sometimes when we can admit that "I don't know what I don't know." That will take you a very long way in a difficult conversation.

The hardest instruction, of course, is how we are to treat our enemies. "Never avenge yourself...but feed them, give them something to drink"—help them with whatever they need; "...overcome evil with good." Responding to those who have been overwhelmed by the flood is easy compared to responding positively, with "good," to the one who hurts you, or denigrates you, or ignores you or treats you in any number of hateful ways. It is especially hard when you have no direct access to the systems or decisions that negatively affect those who you love or about whom you care. How many of us just shake our heads when we hear from Jesus, in Matthew, to actively love our enemies and pray for them... How are we supposed to do that?

Some of you will recognize the name Paul Farmer, doctor, Harvard professor, infectious-disease specialist, who has spent his life treating chronic diseases like tuberculosis in areas of severe poverty and inadequate health care; among those who need it most....in Haiti, Peru, Cuba, Rwanda, Russia. You may have seen the book *To Repair the World*, published a couple of years ago...a collection of his speeches on social justice and global health equity.

Paul Farmer has suggested over the years that one of the most effective tools to use in these most difficult arenas and with difficult people is what he calls the "hermeneutics of generosity." He says:

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“I have a hermeneutic of generosity for you because I know you’re a good guy. Therefore I will interpret what you say and see you in a favorable light. Seems like I’m the one who should hope for as much from you.”

(Tracy Kidder, *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, New York: Random House Trade Paperback Ed., p. 215)

What he encourages is to use generosity as a method of interpreting a situation or person or interaction—and to expect the same in return. He says that so often we practice a “hermeneutic of suspicion” – we expect the worst from the people we meet.

He suggests that we can also practice expecting the best.

(sfaa.net, May 2017)

With our *friends* we assume the best of each other – we expect the best intentions from the other – regardless of the situation, or the difficulty, or perhaps even within an argument—we give each other the benefit of the doubt. Using the hermeneutic of generosity we can evaluate people’s actions with the assumption that their motives are good even if, at first glance, you might think the opposite.

I belabor the point from Paul Farmer, because within his own understanding of faith and spirituality, he has repeatedly demonstrated that such an approach is effective with people and institutions and systems that resist serving those who live on the margins of our society—it has been effective with those who we would say are his, and maybe our, enemies.

Surely, that is what the apostle means by “honor *all* people” ...and “live peaceably with *all*.” And, surely, that is what we mean when we try as a congregation to practice hospitality. It is surely what we mean when we say that “Absolutely everyone is welcome.”

The words become behavior by how we listen to each other—and, by how we walk with each other. It is one of the spiritual gifts—becoming God’s presence for each other.

Farmer calls it “accompaniment” and he has one more suggestion for us. He says:

To accompany someone is to go somewhere with him or her. To break bread together, to be present on a journey with a beginning and an end.... The companion...says: “I’ll go with you and support you on your journey wherever it leads. I’ll share your fate for a while” -and by “a while” [Farmer says:] I don’t mean a little while. Accompaniment is about sticking with a task until it’s deemed completed—not by the [companion], but by the person being accompanied.

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(Paul Farmer, *To Repair the World*. Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2013, p. 234)

More behavior.

More activity.

Action.

Maybe it is as simple as writing a check to Presbyterian Disaster Agency or as complicated as jumping into the murky political waters of the immigration policy debates in our state and country. You do know how effective accompaniment is because of those in this family who have walked with you in your difficulty; or when you have walked with them.

But it starts with intention – this Romans passage begins by saying “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.” It is a principle for how we treat everyone, and it begins with each other. And, it is possible because we use the gifts of the spirit together, in community, given by the grace of God, given and *used* – worked by each of us – for the common good.

“If any would follow me,” says Jesus, “put yourself inside this ‘full charge.’” Explore it, try it, argue it, help each other with it. And I will accompany you. I will give you my spirit. I will walk with you, as you walk with each other, until the task is completed.

That, of course, brings us to the Lord’s Supper.

This is, first of all, a table for everyone. The hospitality of this table is that of Christ, so of all the levels of welcome that we experience, that welcome is total and ultimate here.

It is the welcome by the one who promises to walk with us, to the end of our task. This is where Christ invites us to be in touch with God, with God’s love, and with each other – and, so, whoever we are, or from wherever we have come, or wherever we are on our own journey of life and faith, we are all included.

This symbol that we can touch and taste is meant to show us what genuine love is and what holding fast to the good is. Christ “out does” us in showing honor to each of us: we are all invited to this table, now. Come, this is the table of the Lord – ready for you.

In the name of God: Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit. Amen.