

“Be At Peace With One Another”

Romans 12:9-21

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Today we will examine what it means to be at peace with one another. Paul outlines many attributes of those who make the effort to get along. However, to be at peace with one another can be a tall order. Consider this story of a police officer called to a crime scene.

A police officer jumps into his squad care and calls the station. “I have an interesting case here,” he says. “A woman shot her husband for stepping on the floor she just mopped.” “Have you arrested her?” asks the sergeant. “No, not yet. The floor’s still wet.”

In the context of today’s reading, being at peace with one another means communications with persons on a one-to-one basis, in community of faith and out in the wider community. Being at peace does not mean we always agree with one another but that we see each other through “soft” eyes.” In the very first verse of our Scripture for today, it reads “Let love be genuine.” Another way to interpret that word genuine is authentic or candid; that does not mean forced assent.

As a preface to looking closer at this passage, I would like to share with you a portion of a poem entitled “Conversion” by a contemporary poet, Billy Collins.

Conversion

I would like to spend the day on a slope  
of a mountain, listening to a parable  
about a lost sheep or a blighted vineyard.

For months my only companion would be this story.  
and the more I told it to myself  
the clearer everything would become.

Then, I would remove my helmet of opinions  
and walk into the public streets  
revealing the soft brown mushroom of my new head.

What struck me about this poem is the description of what we do if we open ourselves to genuinely relate to others. To “remove the helmet of opinions” was for me a strong visual metaphor for how we all at one time or another wear such a helmet, sometimes not even knowing we are doing so.

In this letter to the Romans, Paul is addressing the members of the newly forming Christian church. There were definitely strong beliefs that were being challenged. The members were made up of Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. By composition alone, there were some fairly big hurdles that had been overcome. First of all the Jewish community had a long covenantal relationship with God and it was based on defining faith as obedience to the Torah. In other words, becoming close to God and obedience to the Torah went hand in hand. This morning’s reading from Deuteronomy is a strong statement about the place of the law in Jewish culture. Moses says to the people “And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today?” And

the people are admonished to remain faithful to the ordinances and pass them along “to your children and your children’s children.” Considering these strong commitments and sense of belonging in a covenantal community, it must have been hard to make the transition to the new Christian church. Another related hurdle that caused more than a little distress was the issue of circumcision. Circumcision was another sign of entrance into the Jewish covenantal community. In Acts there are many descriptions of the arguments about circumcision and whether uncircumcised Gentiles could become a member of this new church. The shift in the early Christian church was from human salvation made possible not by obedience to the Torah but by faith in Jesus whose obedience and death brought salvation. One way to summarize this would be to say that the Torah made Jewish believers aware of sin and Jesus provided freedom from sin. While we do not have as much information the Gentile Christians, one can imagine that they, too, had hurdles to overcome. They had come often from a pagan background with multiple gods. And it must have been difficult to hear the arguments about their lack of circumcision.

To apply this Scripture to our current time and place, one can say that a healthy interpersonal relationship or a healthy community is one where honesty and openness prevail. That is not without challenges. Applying this Scripture to our circumstances will also challenge us to look at other opinions with a softer set of eyes.

Let me ask you this question: how many of you know someone who just “rubs you the wrong way?” If we are honest, most of us do. You have a family gathering, for example. And one family member, we can call this hypothetical person Jane or John has been invited. More often than not, this person comes with an attitude or a current ax to grind. I think if we apply today’s lesson to this kind of situation, the best we can do is to “the best of our ability, live peaceably with this person. It is not about “fixing” this person, but learning to accept who they are and be as tolerant as possible. However, it does not mean that we shy away from behavior that is harmful. Genuine love is not just being nice to people. Genuine love has a moral orientation toward the good. When we show love toward someone, we are moving them toward God’s goodness. There may be a time when the claims of courtesy have to be secondary to the claims of a principle. We do not have to accept anything and shut our eyes to everything.

Now let’s shift our attention to our community here, Calvary. Over the years I have seen Calvary develop a strong sense of community. We come together to share and participate in our common faith and to gain strength from that commitment. It is not that we have not had or still have our differences. For example, not everyone is completely happy with the PCUSA, while others are more satisfied. Yet, I have heard more than once that “I stay because of who we are at Calvary, not because of what PCUSA does.” Community at Calvary means fellowship and mutual support. I would add to that a genuine caring for one another. In a book on Community making and Peace there is a description about what relationships constitute a health community. It is a “group of individuals who have learned how to communicate honestly with each other, whose relationships go deeper than their masks of composure, and who have developed some significant commitment to ‘rejoice together, mourn together,’ to make others’ conditions our own” Church should be a place where we do not have to always say, “Oh, I am fine.” Rather it is a place where we have come to expect that no matter what, we can be just who we are on any given day. It is OK to be sad, grouchy, needy or just fine. At least that has been my experience at Calvary over the years and I venture to say that is true for many of you. We live out that truth that God loves us just as we are. What better place to experience that truth than here in church. This honesty and radical acceptance should be the goal for us as we introduce ourselves to those who are new to Calvary. It is the essence of being an inclusive group of people who proclaim a commitment to the hospitality expressed in Scripture. If I were to add a word of caution to all of us, it would be to take

care that we do not group ourselves around long time friends, but remain open to those who are new to us and or whose culture is different from our own.

The final community that is addressed in our Scripture today is the one outside of our church perimeter. I would like to share an example of that community taken from actions by the Plateau Ministerial Association.

Last year the Plateau Ministerial Association set an example for the community about how to come together for a common cause, even though the pastors represent different churches and have individual differences in their doctrines and Scriptural interpretation. The situation that prompted a unified response was the unfortunate and divisive events that took place in Charlottesville, Virginia. To their credit, the pastors set aside their differences to sow a unified response that condemned bigotry, racism and hate. They chose to state what we in the Plateau are **for** rather than against. Here are the statements that appeared in the Courier Herald article that we are for:

- All people are made in the image of God
- All people are of infinite value and worth
- All people are created equal and are loved by God
- All people are in need of God's compassion and grace and
- We are better together than we are apart.

I think this is a strong example of today's Scripture lived out in a very concrete way. To quote from the book Community Making and Peace, "the spirit of community is a manifestation of the Holy Spirit," In the case of the Plateau Ministerial Association, the individual members set aside some strongly held beliefs in order to come together for this common cause. It was an example of transcendence. To transcend means to climb over. The key to transcendence in this usage is to appreciate and accept differences.

So as we do our best to be a peace with one another, it is a comfort to know that we are not doing this alone. First of all, we have one another. Then we have the best source of help of all, the Lord. Remember the distinction: we do not achieve salvation by obedience to the law, but through the obedience and death of Jesus that brings us into the most sacred of relationships. We come into a relationship with God based on God's love and acceptance of us. We can give thanks for the inclusivity of the family of God, where we are all accepted, whether we remember to take off our helmets of opinion or not.