

Proper 17 Year A

8/30/2020

Exodus 3:1-15; Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28

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Our second reading today keeps us in Romans chapter 12.

Last week we noted how grace impacts our relationship with people within the church...

Our fellow brothers and sisters in the Lord Jesus...

The family of God...

Our posture in the church should be to serve each other through the gifts that God has given us.

We should not come to church to see what the church can offer us...

but we should come to church to see what we can offer to the church... for the people of God.

Today, St. Paul describes our relationships a step further...

In regard to people within the church and...

Moreover, people outside of the church.

Our neighbors...

The people we like... and the people we don't like.

And for the most part it's pretty straight forward.

It's pretty simple.

Like the golden rule:

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. (Matthew 7:12)

One of the greatest baseball players of all time was Ted Williams.

Once he heard someone say, "Hitting a baseball is simple."

His response?

"Sure, hitting the ball is simple – that doesn't mean it's easy."

It's the same way with the principles of how we treat others.

It really is simple.

But it's not easy.

You see it's fairly easy to be kind and compassionate when things are going well.

When we are all getting along.

But it becomes a difficult task when we have conflicts.

And if you are unsure of what I mean...

Just take a look at what comes across on our media screens regarding how people treat other people when there is a conflict.

We all have conflicts in our life...

Conflicts are normal.

And conflicts always involve other people.

People we like; people we don't like

People we are related to; people we barely know

People we know; people we don't personally know at all

We have conflicts in life because of the actions, decisions, words, and behavior of other people.

We have conflicts in life because of our own actions and words.

And for those of us who avoid conflict... I have some bad news:

Conflict in our communities is not going away anytime soon.

It will be here until Jesus returns in all His glory...

So, we need to figure this out...

Conflict is here to stay.

And we can't get away from it.

It happens.

So, how do we handle conflict?

How are we to treat other people?

What do the Holy Scriptures say about conflict?

As a Christian, how am I called to handle conflict?

Well, our behavior has a lot to do with it.

And I believe Romans 12 gets right to it.

In fact, most translations give this section of scripture the heading:

Marks of the True Christian

Which is interesting...

because it doesn't say anything about belief, faith, grace, or the cross of Christ.

Not to say those things aren't important...

The first 11 chapters of Romans focused on those aspects.

But what our text does say is in regard to a most important thing...
our behavior.

Especially our behavior in light of our belief, faith, grace, and the cross of Jesus Christ.

I am going to read our text again...

this time from The Message paraphrase.

I am going to read it nice and slow...

listen to the words again in light of this crazy world we live in.

Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it.

Run for dear life from evil;

hold on for dear life to good.

Be good friends who love deeply;

practice playing second fiddle.

*Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame.
Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant.
Don't quit in hard times; pray all the harder.
Help needy Christians; be inventive in hospitality.*

*Bless your enemies; no cursing under your breath.
Laugh with your happy friends when they're happy;
share tears when they're down.
Get along with each other; don't be stuck-up.
Make friends with nobodies; don't be the great somebody.*

*Don't hit back; discover beauty in everyone.
If you've got it in you, get along with everybody.
Don't insist on getting even; that's not for you to do.
"I'll do the judging," says God. "I'll take care of it."*

*Our Scriptures tell us that if you see your enemy hungry,
go buy that person lunch,
or if he's thirsty, get him a drink.
Your generosity will surprise him with goodness.
Don't let evil get the best of you;
get the best of evil by doing good.*

It's so simple... but not easy.

Our actions... our behavior... are so important...

Especially in times of conflict.

And we shouldn't act like the rest of the world in these times.

St. Paul wrote in the beginning of this chapter:

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. (Romans 12:2).

We are going to disagree with each other.

We are going to get frustrated... perhaps angry...

at particular groups of people.

Conflicts are going to happen between people...

But do we:

Bless those who persecute us and not curse them.

Do we:

Live in harmony with one another.

Do we:

So far as it depends on us, live peaceably with all.

Will we:

Not give in to evil, but overcome evil with good.

In fact, I challenge all of us... including me...
the next time we want to say something nasty to someone...
or share a Facebook post...
or write an email...
can we share our point-of-view and keep in step with this portion of
scripture?

Nobody said it would be easy...
Living out this Christian faith in our world is a difficult task.

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus said:
*If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his
cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but
whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.*

You mean to tell me that I have to deny myself?
I can't choose what I want to do?
I shouldn't say what I really want to say?

That's impossible!
You want me to bless my enemies?

You want me to speak peaceably of our politicians?

I mean... Have you seen what they said?

You want me to live at peace with that person who hurt me?

You want me to serve other people? Dirty people? Strange people?

People who look different than me?

Yes! Yes! Yes! But more importantly

I'm not saying it...

Jesus is.

And if we follow Christ... his path is a path of the Cross.

...let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

And we would be right to say, "That's impossible!"

Because it is.

We can't do it...

Not on our own.

But there is One who makes possibilities out of the impossible.

There is One who makes a way where there seems to be no way.

There is a Person who is with us in our conflicts... in our anger...

in our hurt... in our pain.

That person is Jesus Christ.

And it is only through him that we can behave properly in times of conflict.

When we humble ourselves and call to him... Denying ourselves... following the path of the cross... the path of Christ...

His grace and love meet us there...

And by His Spirit we are empowered to live a life we thought we couldn't live.

When we turn to God in prayer...

When we meditate on Holy Scripture...

When we pray, "Come Holy Spirit."

We can walk in step with the Spirit of God.

Yielding to the Spirit's illumination of scripture...

Where the primary fruit in our life is highlighted by the behaviors of sacrifice and humility...

And more and more our behavior becomes like the words of Romans 12.

Our hope is not in politicians... or a political party. Praise God!

Our hope is not in cultural movements...

Our hope is not in humanity.

Our hope is in the Lord Jesus Christ.

And when he returns...

He will set all things right.

Justice will be served.

And in the meantime,... as we wait for his return...

May we be faithful...

Even in our behavior...

Asking God to give us the strength to be a beacon of light on this earth...

And may our prayer always be...

Come Holy Spirit,

Fill the hearts of Your faithful,

And kindle in us the fire of Your love.

Amen.