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## Wrestling with Paul

*Romans 12:9-21 & 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15*

Good Morning,

I find this morning's lectionary text challenging to listen too. So much so that I added in the Romans 12 text because I couldn't send people away with only the 2 Thessalonians passage. It is one of the many stories in the Bible that causes me discomfort and unease. Particularly verse 14 **"Take note of those who don't obey our teachings in this letter. Shame them refusing to associate with them."** Or even before that in verse 6 **"we urge you, sisters and brothers, to keep away from anyone who refuses to work and live according to teachings we passed on to you."** And if I'm really being honest the middle bit where the author goes on about how *they* **"didn't live undisciplined lives,"** and how *they* **"worked day and night to the point of exhaustion so as not to impose on you,"** feels very passive aggressive.

These verses have been used as slogan's for anti-welfare campaigns, and my negative reaction to them made me want to avoid this scripture altogether and pick out something else. But avoiding the frustrating parts of the Bible usually leaves me feeling more lost.

Once in high school other students came up to me with a Google searched list of bible verses, that were pretty horrible. They read each one asking "this is what you believe? Really? This is your God?" I had never heard most of these verses before and I had nothing to respond with. I was shocked and embarrassed that my bible could contain them.

When I went to some of the adults in my life for answers, these verses were brushed away with comments like “well yes but it’s a very old book; we don’t listen to those parts” or “that is taken out of context” or even “the Bible is the will of God not the will of Nora” indicating it would be best if I adjusted my principles or qualms and embraced these lines as virtuous. I was taught that if I was uncomfortable with a particular verse in scripture, it was because I was reading it wrong. I hadn’t spent enough time with it yet, or I was too ignorant to read the passage properly. I’m sure sometimes that’s true.

But I’ve started to realize that when something causes me hurt or pain, its not usually because I’m too ignorant to understand it. It’s because I recognize a piece of what’s going on, and when I see the lines on the page lived out it does not feel good. It doesn’t fit with Paul’s letter to Rome, which professes an ethic of **generous hospitality, patience in trial, the commands to not repay evil with evil, to not take revenge or be condescending to those who have less.** The urge in vs.21 **to never stoop to cruelty but to always meet it with goodness.** The messaging in these two books seems so contrary that we either have to write one off or pretend that the inconsistency is not an issue.

I think that an important challenge for people of faith is to find space to sit in the discomfort of the broken spaces, in our world - and in our scripture. We can’t always have a perfect answer for how to respond, or a line to sugar coat the harshness of something in front of us. So, we are going to spend a bit of our morning sitting in some discomfort and working through this text.

African Theologian Kä Mana directs readers to use a reconstructive theology approach. This includes four steps:

1. Incarnation – immersion in the context of the text and of the reader
2. Questioning – contesting everything that alienates human dignity
3. Liberation – freeing the imagination to overcome oppression and injustice
4. Innovation – planting the seeds of God’s Kin-dom into all levels of our experience

We will begin with incarnation, starting with the community the letter is directed to. The Thessalonian Christians were mainly Greek-speaking non-Jews, though there would have been a few Jewish people. The core of this community would have been comprised of hard-working labourers. A pattern of community meals can be assumed, early church meetings would often be gatherings in the homes of wealthier members, and include a meal that would be somewhat akin to a potluck format.

There is an expectation that new believers were taking on the traditions and values of the community: their emphasis on grace and peace, the relational nature of Jesus and God, and Jesus and people. There is a strong teaching that Jesus’ faithfulness was in his living out of love and refusal to use evil. The ethic would be very in step with the values professed in our Romans text.

The other piece of incarnation is naming the community of the reader, which is us, Osler Mennonite Church. We are receiving this text in a community of people who are very service oriented and value hard work. We live in a nation that glorifies overwork as a marker of societal success. And we are a Mennonite community, carrying a historical background that contains acts of shaming and exclusion in our church communities, and continues to work through healing around this.

The next step in reconstructing is questioning whatever might be harmful within the text. Naming our concerns, so here are mine:

- First, the idea that you have to be willing to work in order to receive food is a problem for me. It places conditions on mercy and grace that I don't see exemplified in Jesus, YHWH, or the social service frameworks that I most admire. So I am left questioning putting conditions on mercy.
- Next, the message that our most holy examples are those that **“work night and day, laboring to the point of exhaustion.”** That this is an **“example for us to imitate”** is not good news. A community that is striving for every member to be exhausted is not a healthy community, it is a breeding ground for resentment, and burn-out, and significant health problems. I question this work-ethic being held up as the goal.
- Lastly, the shame narrative. The command to ostracize people as a teaching tool and shame them so that you don't risk your own holiness is terrible. We have church history, and prison studies that show us the impact of isolation and shame as a teaching tool and it is detrimental to rehabilitation. I question any ethic that proposes a shame based disciplinary system.

Now for the hopeful side of things: liberation & innovation. How can we wrestle with the words of Paul and find in them a lifegiving message? What in these words is good news to the oppressed, the struggling, and how does it help us to live out God's vision of love and shalom?

Commentators stress that the text assumes the freedom and dignity of the children of God. They firmly state that it is not people needing welfare that are the problem, because this freedom to choose not to work implies that there is choice involved, that work is available. This means there is an exemption for all those that are unable to work due to the numerous barriers within society. These scholars are working to reclaim the misuse of the passage and de-stigmatize unemployment.

There is also debate around what is meant by “work.” A lot of researchers focus on the translation of “busybodies.” Noting that Paul is using word play to emphasize that instead of being “busy with work” these people are “busy causing trouble.” Two different understandings crop up.

Some scholars write that the busybodies were people in the community who believed they had already been perfected through the love of God and no longer needed to participate in further discipleship acts. That their idleness was coming from a state of entitlement and disregard for a relational ethic. I can understand why the Paul might find this mindset obnoxious and seek to correct it.

The other idea that comes up is that there was a misunderstanding in the church concerning Paul’s teachings about the end of time and the daily conduct of believers. That because of apocalyptic expectations there was a growing mentality that work, and this life would soon be over and was therefore meaningless. This thinking supposedly unleashed a bit of a revolutionary social attitude of “why try if its all ending soon anyway.” It is this unruly refusal to participate in the rhythm of community that disrupted the welfare of the entire group.

The busybodies were guilty of refusing to do good works or service. This was a barrier for communal shalom, it was inhibiting the work of mutual and universal love and care for one another. Paul wants to impress on this congregation that their actions are a part of the fulfillment of God's vision, not just wasted time until Jesus comes back.

Lifting up these understandings, maybe we can receive this text not as a limit of mercy and grace, but a call to stop actions that are getting in the way of grace for this community. It's not a perfect flip for a new message, but it is helping me find an Oreo in the trash can so to speak. I can understand how harmful it is when people don't care about people or creation today because they don't believe they have to worry about a tomorrow. This insight does help to liberate some of the issues I have with this scripture.

What helps more is to read it in conversation with the Roman's text. Here Paul is looking at the implications of God's Kin-dom for daily life. It is prioritizing teachings on how we relate to other human beings and saying that this is important. There is a call for Christians to engage in the work of love, to live out authentically loving lives, and to participate in this work of being in a community that is seeking shalom.

It stresses that to live in unity means to constantly exercise love to one another, and to bring about peace. If we look at Thessalonians again through this foundation then it is not quite as easy to use this verse to promote over-work, because working for healthy communities isn't working until we break.

Now, how can we liberate the shaming verses? First, we can set up our pillar understandings before turning to the specific verse. We embrace a radical understanding of God's grace.

Paul's ethic in Roman's declares a love of God that is universal, irrevocable, and freely given. This means that there is no call to achieve or earn God's love, because it is already abundantly gifted, it's not something to work for. In other words, nobody is being turned away by God because they aren't working hard enough.

In Romans Paul is calling for a complete resocialization of the dominant mindset at the time. In an honor-shame code of Roman society, he is teaching a value system that is meant to "re-honor" those who have been shamed in dominate culture. This ethic creates a community based on a culture of love too powerful to be shaken by a worldly understanding of shame. Evil is to be met publicly with loving action that restores peace rather than affirming the power of cruelty. He rejects the moral code of retribution.

So then how can Paul's letter to the Thessalonians call for a disciplinary action that promotes shaming people? Paul plainly states that there are people that we should exclude from the community or at least from these meals they shared together. These words don't have a background of scholarly dispute around translation or cultural difference. In other words, I can't wriggle out of them based on a technicality.

Last April, Rachelle Friesen from Christian Peacemaker Teams held a workshop in Saskatoon titled "White Privilege and Holding Your Loved Ones Accountable." The focus of the conversation was about how to respond to racist comments in a way that doesn't cut you off from the person you're in conversation with, but doesn't leave you complicit in racism. It was an excellent workshop about how to be in relationship with people when it's very hard to do so, but that part isn't why I bring it up.

Rachelle taught us a new term “Radical Love Boundary.” She told us that it is important to engage in the difficult work of talking to people we really disagree with, that we shouldn’t just cut people out or shame them because that’s not how we change the world. However sometimes we need to have a radical love boundary.

Sometimes what people are doing is so hurtful to us or others that we need to firmly put up a boundary and truthfully state “What you are doing or saying makes me feel unsafe. I don’t know how to hold this relationship well because of the pain I feel, so I can’t be in direct relationship with you.”

Rachelle named that this is not done out of hate for the other person, but a recognition that if there is no *shalom* present in a relationship the most loving action can be to take space. To recognize our limits and be honest and kind and imperfect.

While I can’t sit well with a verse that says to shame someone to teach them their wrong I can understand that sometimes we don’t know how to be in direct relationship when things feel toxic, and that we need to be able to put up radical love boundaries, knowing that God’s love is big enough to take in the people that I feel unable to.

I’m still wrestling with Paul in this scripture, and I have not succeeded in liberating all my questions with this text. But so far, through this process I think there are ways that I can still be in relationship with it. I can find where love and justice and hope are coming into this scripture. I can be content not with a nice conclusion, but with the gift of wrestling, of believing that there is enough goodness to keep working with frustrating scriptures and seek good news even within them. Amen.