

Readings: Romans 12:9-21, Matthew 16:21-28 (alt: Ex. 3:1-15, Ps. 105:1-6).

My days of playing competitive hockey are long gone but I continue to follow hockey closely. One of the main people I follow to get my hockey fix is a guy by the name of Elliotte Friedman. He writes a regular article and hosts a podcast called '32 Thoughts.' It is called that because there are 32 teams in the NHL and Friedman's style is to offer a number of short thoughts on a variety of things going on in hockey rather than choose 1 idea or theme and go in depth.

The lectionary passage that I want to focus on today in Romans 12, reads to me like one of these articles. Unlike a lot of Scripture where you read a longer passage centered on a main theme, Romans 12:9-21 reads like a rapid-fire collection of various commands and encouragements. Kind of like the author felt they were running out of time to communicate everything they wanted and so just started quickly saying everything they hadn't said yet, one after another.

So in the spirit of 32 Thoughts I'm going to move through Romans 12 offering a brief reflection on 12 thoughts that came up. Each small statement or sentence could be expanded into its own sermon but I'm going to keep the reflections brief, even incomplete at times. And with passages like this and a sermon like this, I understand that we're not going to leave here and remember each idea but my hope is that something here will grab you, the Spirit will help something settle into your heart and mind, and you'll be able to reflect more deeply on that as you go from here. And so at the end of the sermon I'd like to have a bit of an open mic time around what stood out for you from these verses and reflections. So keep that in mind. That's why I'm calling the sermon '12 Thoughts and More,' the 'More' being the thoughts any of you add at the end. So our passage begins:

1. "Your love must be sincere."

The community is called to love one another genuinely, sincerely. Just a bit later in chapter 13 we read **"Whoever loves another person has fulfilled the Law. The commandments, *Don't commit adultery, don't murder, don't steal, don't desire what others have,* and any other commandments, are all summed up in one word: *You must love your neighbor as yourself.* Love doesn't do anything wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is what fulfills the Law."** (Rom. 13:8-10 CEB).

So the call is to love one another. But what does it mean to love sincerely, genuinely? Perhaps it's a striving for congruence between our inner and outer

selves so that our love is not performative, not a show. In some ways, the rest of the passage can be read in light of this call to love sincerely. The other verses flesh this out a bit and reflect on *how* we can live in love. So we continue:

2. “Hate what is evil and cling to what is good.”

Said so simply. Paul calls these believers to let go of, reject what is evil and embrace what is good.

When we were studying the Thai language the word for repentance struck me. The Thai word is ‘Glap-Jai’ where ‘jai’ is the word for heart and ‘glap’ is a word that you see on U-turn signs, it means to go back. So repentance in Thai describes a U-turn of the heart. This is what I think of when I read these words. Paul is calling these believers to do a sort of U-turn if they were heading in the direction of evil in any way. Do a U-turn back to what is good and cling to that.

So how do we discern what is good? I’ve spoken about this before but through my journey of deconstructing and reconstructing faith I have found the words of Jesus in Matthew 7 to be important. Here Jesus talks about discerning a person through the fruit of their life, stating, **“every good tree produces good fruit, and every rotten tree produces bad fruit.”** And later **“Therefore, you will know them by their fruit.”** (Matt. 7:17, 20).

And that language of fruit brings to mind Galatians 5:22-23 which says, “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patient endurance, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” As I have and continue to walk the journey of discerning what is worth holding onto, clinging to, and what should be released, this fruit of the Spirit has been a helpful guide. Perhaps if something or someone produces this good fruit we can say God is present there, perhaps we can embrace this. By contrast, if something or someone doesn’t produce this fruit, produces the opposite, even if they claim God, perhaps we have permission to question that or even reject it? These words have been a helpful guide for me as I seek to hate what is evil and cling to what is good. Paul continues:

3. “Love one another with the affection of sisters and brothers.”

I won’t add much here as we already talked about loving sincerely but I do appreciate the ‘sisters and brothers’ addition as it can be a reminder of our interdependence within the Community of Creation (Randy Woodley’s term). That we are connected with one another and with every part of creation, whether we always realize it or not. We are part of one family. Next:

4. “Try to outdo one another in showing respect.”/“Be the best at showing honor to each other.”

When I read this I simply thought: What would our world look like if we competed in showing respect?! Our civilization seems founded on competition. Competition for resources, for fame and attention, for security. What if the competition was for honoring and respecting and loving others? What would it look like if we took this attitude into our homes, work places, communities? We continue:

5. “Don’t grow slack, but be fervent in spirit: the One you serve is Christ.”

I think here of Jesus’ words in Matthew 25 when he speaks of the king saying, **“I was hungry and you gave me food to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you gave me clothes to wear. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me.”** And the people are confused and respond, **“Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink? When did we see you as a stranger and welcome you, or naked and give you clothes to wear? When did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?”** And Jesus says, **“the king will reply to them, ‘I assure you that when you have done it for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you have done it for me.’”** (Matt. 25:35-40).

Service and love for the marginalized is service and love for the Christ. It makes me think also of a famous poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins entitled “As Kingfishers Catch Fire”. Within the poem we read:

I say móre: the just man justices;
Keeps grace: thát keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is —
Christ — for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces.

It is part of the mystery of God that somehow, as we serve and love those among us, we serve and love the Christ who plays in 10,000 places, lovely in limbs and lovely in eyes not theirs. We continue:

6. “Rejoice in hope; be patient under trial; persevere in prayer.”

This brings to mind 2 of our others lectionary passages that I'm not focusing on this morning. In Matthew 16, Jesus tells his disciples about the suffering that is coming for him in Jerusalem and then calls on his disciples to **"take up their cross, and follow me."** Jesus then went to Jerusalem, was arrested, tried, convicted, and crucified all the while showing patience and love and grace for those acting against him. Perhaps Paul is thinking of this as he calls these believers to be patient under trial.

And Paul also says, "persevere in prayer." One of the other lectionary passages for today is Psalm 105 where the Psalmist says, **"Seek the Lord and his strength; seek his presence continually."** I think also of 1 Thessalonians 5:16-17 where the audience is encouraged to **"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances."** What does this continual, persevering prayer look like for us today? Perhaps it could be similar to the language of living mindfully. We hear the word 'mindfulness' everywhere today and this essentially means just being fully present, aware of ourselves and our environment and what is going on, not floating through our days mindlessly. Perhaps this continual and persevering prayer can be a continual, mindful awareness of the presence of the Christ, living our days recognizing this ever-present Transcendent Love who plays in 10,000 places. Paul continues:

7. "Look on the needs of God's holy people as your own; be generous in offering hospitality."

Again, another way of saying "Love your neighbor as yourself." A couple months ago Luke preached about 'Who is our neighbor?' with the encouragement to be ever-widening our circle of who we consider a neighbor. Paul here is encouraging these believers in the same way and to grow in seeing others through God's eyes and to be generous in loving and offering hospitality to those we come in contact with.

8. "Bless people who harass you—bless and don't curse them."

Reminiscent of Jesus' call for us to love our enemies. A short and simple imperative that is anything but easy to follow. The way of the Christ is to choose to love, choose to bless, even when it is hard. Even when we want to hate and curse. Here is another example where we strive for the ideal while dealing with the real. The ideal is to choose to love and bless even those who set themselves up as our enemies. But in reality, as I spoke about in a previous sermon, sometimes in the moment the best we can do is not actively hate, not actively bring more harm and

hate into the world, even as we continue seeking the way of love. Sometimes the way for us to love is to put up a boundary and not engage for a time. So we strive for the ideal even while dealing with the real.

9. “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.”

The encouragement is to join others in what they are experiencing, to practice empathy we could say. It brings my attention to the Old Testament lectionary passage for today from Exodus 3 where God meets with Moses to call him to be the instrument through whom God will rescue the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. God tells Moses: **“I’ve clearly seen my people oppressed in Egypt. I’ve heard their cry of injustice....I know about their pain.”** (3:7). There is a deep empathy in God. We see this most especially in the incarnation of the Christ who experiences the suffering and pain of humanity. There can be a power in empathy and in putting ourselves in the shoes of another, in joining in others’ joy or pain.

10. “Consider everyone as equal, and don’t think that you’re better than anyone else. Instead, associate with people who have no status. Don’t think that you’re so smart”

Another way to flesh out our call to love. See everyone as equal. Pursue equality. Reject arrogance and conceit and embrace humility and love. Don’t separate yourselves from others, from the marginalized, but, again, see our interdependence and equality and be willing to embrace those whom God embraces and loves. As it says in Micah 6:8 **“He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”**

This next one includes a couple verses but we read:

11. “Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.” (NRSVUE). “Do all you can to be at peace with everyone. Don’t take revenge; leave room, my friends, for God’s wrath. To quote scripture, “Vengeance is mine, I will pay them back,” says our God.” But there is more: ‘If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them drink. For in doing so, you will heap burning coals upon their heads.’ (Inclusive Bible)

I struggle with some of the language used here, the emphasis on God taking vengeance, the motivation of doing good to enemies in order to ‘heap burning coals upon their heads.’ But I do appreciate the call to pursue peace by ending the

cycle of violence, by resisting the urge for vengeance that only continues the cycle our world continually chooses. Relatedly and lastly we read:

12. “Don’t be overcome by evil, but overcome evil by doing good.”

Again, reject the cycle our world so often operates in and instead operate in the way of the Christ, doing unto others as you would have them do unto you, loving others as you love yourself. Don’t be overcome by evil but overcome evil by doing good. Hate what is evil, cling to what is good.

That brings me to the end of my series of brief reflections. I now want to open it up for you.

13. Open Mic: What stands out to you as you listen to the various imperatives in this passage and these reflections?

Closing Thought:

Thank you for your input. My hope is that the Spirit will draw out even one of these phrases and settle them in your heart and mind. That we can sit with one of these calls and flesh out what it may mean for our lives. Thank you.

Benediction:

As we go from this place, may God lead us into deeper experiences of their love and peace and may we strive to fill our relationships, homes, communities, and world with the same. Amen.