

PRACTICING HOLINESS: Embracing a Countercultural Community

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Text: Romans 14:7–13

For we do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. While we live, we live for God and when we die, we die for God. Both in life and in death we belong to God. For to this end Christ died and lived again.

Why do you pass judgment on your siblings? Or you, why do you look down upon your siblings? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written,

*“As I live, says God, every knee shall bow to me,
and every tongue shall give praise to God.”*

So then, each one of us will be held accountable.

Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a sibling.

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Last week, Rally Sunday was a celebration infused with joy. All morning long there was a creative energy as we gathered for both worship and fellowship. The gifts of laughter and conversation and participation were all at the forefront. The sanctuary held more people than we have seen in many months, the parking lot was awash in color and aroma, (our beloved choir returned to accolade and ovation), all ages engaged in the festivities offered. People new to us were welcomed, people returning to us were received with love, people who have called Plymouth home for decades offered hospitality and had some fun. It was a beautiful day in a multitude of ways, a tremendous witness to spiritual community.

During a conversation with someone here for the first time, he commented that he felt it might be a little difficult for his child to realize there isn't a bouncy house and giant slide EVERY week at Church school. Rally Sunday met its goal—to acknowledge fully and completely the commencement of a new program year, to encourage excitement for who we are as a church and what we have to offer, to give thanks for the summer months that are filled with recreation and travel and to recognize a Sunday for homecoming and reunion. We didn't just choose church last week (as our fall tagline suggests), we chose Plymouth. Yet here we are on the Sunday after, and it is where our community will be for all the Sundays to come whether there is a party in our parking lot or not. We are currently moving through the church season of Pentecost. It is the longest of the seasons, lasting from Pentecost Sunday which occurred back in May, until the first Sunday of Advent, which begins in December. The purpose of the season of Pentecost is to focus on discipleship growth as individuals and within a congregation. It is why the color for the season is green. Green for growth. The season of Pentecost is also known as Ordinary Time. There are no high holy days during these months, with the exception of All Saint's Day in November. Rally Sunday is an exceptional

day and we showed up and we brought to the day our very best. Now our charge is to discern who we are as unique individuals who create a diverse spiritual community in this Ordinary Time.

Paul's letter to the Romans differs from some of the other epistles in that this writing presupposes that the readers are seasoned Christians who already know much about Jesus and therefore it pursues questions that only mature believers are likely to care about. Even so, Paul addresses the pursuit and organization of shared Christian community as it occurs in most of the writings attributed to the apostle. The final chapters of this book are basically Paul's guidelines for Christian living. As one commentator observes: "Paul's rhetorical strategy is oriented towards a communal posture of embrace: segregation is not an option; intermingling is a must...it is fascinating to observe how Paul arranges every aspect around his God-centered perspective. Nothing escapes the divine relations. Nothing is deemed too banal to be directed in honor of the God who has given life. Every ordinary action can be aimed for the benefit of the neighbor, which is a participation in the hospitality of Christ, dedicated to the glory of God. God should be at the center of our lives. Paul envisions a community where every relationship, every investment, every interaction, every habit, and every effort is directed toward honoring God and displaying God's generous welcome to others." (David McCabe, Working Preacher.com)

So, like us, the Christian church in Rome had to determine how to be community day to day, week to week, in the mundane rather than the extraordinary. The food truck gone, the bouncy house deflated, the big celebration complete, how does the church be church? While the section of scripture read today focuses on letting go of judgment, and reminding the community of their accountability to God, there are other mandates in different parts of this book: the covenant to love one another, rejoice in hope, persevere in prayer. Paul suggests over and over again that what matters most in the life of the church is harmony and mutual growth of every living human being. This is contrary to what the outside world dictates and demands. Spiritual community, rooted in the love of God and determined by the mandates of Jesus is created to counter what society teaches, professes and lifts up as the norm. The church must be different. And when the church "fails to be a sacred space for unity and appreciation of diversity, the entire secular world suffers." (Israel Kamundzandu, WorkingPreacher.com)

Last week DeWayne preached an important message on choosing church during a time when so many are leaving religious communities. And he named that it is hard work to be church. And I witnessed many of you nodding in agreement. Many of you have lived through difficult seasons here at Plymouth, when dissension ruled the day and divisions occurred over decisions made. Others of you have left faith communities because it became too hard to stay, something had shifted or changed and the dynamics that invited you in no longer existed. Some of you have distanced from church for awhile, needing to separate from difficult personalities, or grappling with feelings of not getting what you need—spiritually—from the community in which you were engaged. I had a reaction to DeWayne's pronouncement last week. Each time I heard him say that being church is hard work I nodded, too, and then immediately thought... yes, but—really being church is easy. We make it hard. Paul's instructions in being church are meant for us, too. Let go of judgment, Paul writes. Judgment is for God alone. Whether we criticize or categorize others, God is the only one who has the final say upon each person's being.

We have been conditioned—through our privilege and societal teachings—that we have the right to judge others. Think of the shift in us if we loosed ourselves of judgment. If we gazed upon each person who entered this space as holy and beloved. If we did not make assumptions of another's character based on their appearance and instead offered the hospitality we modeled on Rally Sunday. Being church would be easy.

We have been conditioned—through our privilege and societal teachings—that tolerance is the key to getting along. To tolerate means to endure the existence, occurrence, or practice of something that one does not necessarily like or agree with. I have long disliked the word tolerate, because it is void of compassion and acceptance. The world calls us to tolerance—we are to “put up with” those who do look like we do, those who love differently than we do, those who do not securely fit into a normative box the world deems appropriate. Paul’s message to the Romans is, as one scholar suggests, “a call to introspection of individuals, groups, clergy, and faith pillars who have settled into a culture of tolerance instead of love, hospitality, and appreciation of others. The entire New Testament is about love, but many people operate with a mindset of tolerating others, rather than loving them.” (Israel Kamudzandu, WorkingPreacher.com) What if we intentionally chose love over tolerance? What if we decided to fully embrace the command of Jesus to love one another without exception? Not just in theory. Not just an intellectual love. A real, physical, embracing, meaningful love. Being church would be easy.

We have been conditioned—through our privilege and societal teachings—that those who do not fit into a white, heterosexual, cis-gender, middle or upper class mold are “less than”. To exclude becomes a too often and too natural response “out there” yet is an all too common occurrence in here, too. Over 30 years of ministry I have had hundred, possibly thousands of conversations with folks who have been hurt and shunned and abused by the spiritual community that professed to love them at their baptism, preaching God is love with all kind of conditions. That anyone could endure that kind of ostracism and cruelty and then venture into another church is a testament to their courage and desire to know the God who loves without condition and embraces each of us as holy and beloved. And every week, people carrying the terrible burden of destructive church dogma come here, to Plymouth, seeking a different way to be God’s community together. We come to this place hoping for healing, praying for comfort, longing for acceptance. If we decided that we were to practice holiness—that is to emulate the loving kindness of our abundant God, to live out the tenets of faith that Jesus taught, to trust in the Holy Spirit to bind us together in beautiful harmony, being church would be easy.

Criticism is hard, kindness is easy.

Judgment is hard, acceptance is easy.

Racism, genderism, sexism is hard; inclusion is easy.

Tolerance is hard; love is easy.

Dogma is hard; exploration is easy.

I pray we would focus our intentions so to be an easy church, to be counter cultural in a world so broken by its harmful priorities. Wouldn’t it be something, if in our Ordinary Time together, we celebrated our countercultural community, practicing holiness with all, not just some. While every Sunday cannot be Rally Day, every Sunday can be a community rooted in love and sustained by grace.

It’s easy. Amen.