

**Sermon: August 30, 2020 - Romans 12: 9-18**  
**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley**

watch at <https://youtu.be/QhSLfk3WFOY>

A few years ago, a popular thing in home décor stores was “house rules” posters to put up in your kitchen or as needed, to assist in the harmonious running of a household. Typically, they started with things like, “if you make a mess, clean it up”... “if you take it out, put it back”... often ending with “if it cries, love it.” Handy, helpful advice for people living together.

The Bible, in various places, contains ancient versions of this, known as “household codes.” Much of what we read in the book of Proverbs, for example, looks a lot more like a series of household maxims, than a sacred pronouncement from on high.

At first blush, today’s reading from the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans has that same feel to it. British Bible scholar F.F. Bruce suggested that these verses may have been a sort of “pocket catechism”, meaningful enough that every new Christian should learn them, yet brief enough that they could be committed to memory. So let’s hear these words one more time:

*<sup>9</sup> Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; <sup>10</sup> love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. <sup>11</sup> Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>12</sup> Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. <sup>13</sup> Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.*

*<sup>14</sup> Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. <sup>15</sup> Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. <sup>16</sup> Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly;<sup>[b]</sup> do not claim to be wiser than you are. <sup>17</sup> Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. <sup>18</sup> If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.*

Beautiful, lyrical sentiments, to be sure, bordering at points on being “quaint” – and some of it will sound so familiar and obvious, that it may sound like stuff that shouldn’t need to be written down. But just like those household rule posters, even though everyone *should* know “if you open it, close it”, it’s never a bad idea to have those obvious things about relationships and accountability in big bold letters where everyone can see it. And similarly, it’s never a bad idea for us, as a community of faith, to hear some of the basics one more time.

Five years ago, we did a study at Ralph Connor entitled, “Animate: Faith.” In one of the sessions, we brainstormed some of the words that people might associate with the word, “Religious.” I managed to locate this list, and it was pretty much as I had remembered it. Some of the terms we came up with were positive, such

as, safe and sacred space - care and concern for social justice - trying to follow Jesus – accountable - prayerful – but these were overwhelmed by other terms: dogmatic – hypocritical – old fashioned and immovable – rule bound – judgmental. I hear that second list – along with the commonly fielded accusation these days, that any form of spirituality is deluded – and my heart aches. How did we get to such a place? And how does that list of negative responses, relate to this scripture from the Apostle Paul, with its lofty goal that Christians and Christian communities will keep returning to love?

In addition to a general societal trend away from institutionally-organized “anything,” and the fully justified rejection of religion of those who have been wounded by the Church, some of the negativity toward organized religion has been imported from elsewhere. In the news, we hear way too much of the hurtful, harmful rhetoric coming from a brand of Christianity that couldn’t be further away from Jesus if it tried, a bombastic amalgam of ultra-patriotism, racism, homophobia, and misogyny that clearly states its opposition to social justice or anything remotely progressive, with, at times, a virulent suspicion of all things scientific. It’s loud, it’s outrageous, and, unfortunately, is a product that sells... so THAT form of in-your-face, back-to-the-19<sup>th</sup> century presentation of Christianity, gets equated with what it is to be a follower of Jesus in the minds of many.

But it would be too easy for me to just blame this context of negativity on factors beyond our control. The 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans lists these things as the hallmarks of Christian community: love, honouring others, enthusiasm, happiness, hope, patience, devotion, generosity, empathy, equality, respect, and peacefulness, all of which are held in a prayerful container that acknowledges the blessedness of life. My first question is this: would anyone guess that these things were important to me, by the way I conduct my life? And the follow-up question, is, how about as a Church...?... are things like empathy, respect, equality, hopefulness, evident in our programs and priorities? I think they are, mostly, but from the outside looking in, what would you see??

That first question, about how these qualities of the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans find a home in our everyday lives, I’m going to leave for you to answer for yourselves. But the second question, about the qualities of our gathered life, is a toughie right now, when we are still mostly apart from one another. I am so grateful to our Care Contact phoners, for expressing Christ’s own concern for others, staying in touch for the past five-plus months by phone and email. Our prayer ministries have also been a blessing, regularly praying for the needs of others, not only in formal prayer times but keeping people on our hearts and minds as we go through our weeks. And I am thankful for the Ralph Connor Council and Committees that have kept working away at things that will be of future use once we are back together in a more fulsome way. I am thankful for all these things, and yet Paul’s call to active love still tugs at my sleeve, wondering aloud if we are

who we want to be *in relationship to one another*... and then, the question that Paul put to the first Christians: are we willing to embody these qualities, *not just in relation to each other within a congregation, but in relation to the world around us?*

We live in such fractious times. American seminary professor Amy Lindeman Allen, reflecting on the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans, wrote this: “Christians are called not to ignore despair, but to help sow joy in its wake; not to condone hate, but to be all the more zealous in their own loving in its face. The politics of overcoming evil are about neither ignoring nor condoning evil, but rather, fighting it with the strongest power possible—love.” She wrote that, not this week, but three years ago. To help us understand how fully the Apostle Paul’s words in his day can apply to our day, she writes, “Roman Christians [found] themselves on the ‘outside’ of their social circles due to their new religious beliefs that forbade the worship of idols. Family members, co-workers, and neighbors who had not converted to Christianity did not understand and did not approve of the new behaviors of their Christian counterparts who refused to attend public events, many of which were deeply integrated with this sort of idol worship.

She continues: “This experience of their neighbors and families not understanding where Christians are coming from in relation to public discourse and current events seems to be something we have never escaped... [In our day,] Christians who seek to follow the commandment to love often find themselves on the other side of their families, co-workers, and friends when it comes to current social and political issues.” And then she gets even more specific: “In the wake of recent white nationalist activity... and renewed public outcry against hate speech, Paul’s words to the Romans are as timely as ever.”

Indeed, these words from Paul, which may appear as old-fashioned nostalgic hearkening to an earlier version of Church life, are not just pointers on how to have a nice Church that people will like. They are a call to go deep into the heart of Jesus, to recommit ourselves to be the hands and feet and voice of Christ, to engage the hurts of a world in deep distress. Who are we as those who bear the Christ-light, in response to issues of race and privilege? Who are we, relative to the cries of the earth, which needs us to be stewards rather than exploiters? Who are we, as we hear of the struggles of health care workers and educators, simultaneously praised for a job well done, and pressured to ‘make do’ with the resources allocated to them? As Church – not just this congregation, but “Church” in its biggest sense – do these qualities of Christ’s active, engaged love continue to find a home, urging us onward, or have they ceased to describe who we are and who we think the world needs us to be?

As our congregation takes tentative steps toward re-starting face-to-face activities, I urge us to keep these bigger questions in mind: to seek to bring the radical, transformative power of God’s love into every situation we encounter. If

taken as a happy little to-do list for a Church to be a nice place, Romans 12, quite frankly, doesn't add much to the world; but if it can lift our spirits and expand our horizons, such that we see the whole world as being within our circle of care, and everyone as a sibling in love, well, that's quite a different thing, isn't it?

Realistically, many of us, at the moment, are working with deeply diminished capacity. Everyone has been unsettled by this pandemic, some have been outright traumatized, all have been diminished by not being able to be present to one another in all the ways we would want to. None of what has been said this morning, is intended to add to those burdens at a time when the burdens are significant, and significantly off-balance. But what I do hope, is for us to always live with the knowledge that Christ's call to love is a big, enlivening entity that opens huge possibilities. If I am equipped by my own power alone, it all would be too much, but it's not by my own power: a life of faithfulness is energized and directed by love, a love that calls me beyond myself to find others yearning for that vision of just, empowering, barrier-breaking love. That love, embodied by "me" and embodied by "we", can be – must be - the foundation of that "new normal" whose onset we yearn for. With sighs too deep for words, with trust that God's heart is set on this, and with deep reliance on the grace of Christ, may this be so. Amen.

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