

First Presbyterian Church  
Bozeman, Montana  
Dan Krebill, co-pastor

September 3, 2017  
*22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time*  
Romans 12:9-21

### **The Covenant of Hospitality**

Whenever the stability and level of relative calm in our culture is stirred or shaken, the Christian church has not only the opportunity, but the obligation to step forward and speak its voice amidst the cacophony of other voices clamoring for attention.

It would seem that the world in which we find ourselves today is a world in flux—changing in its composition, changing in its character, and changing in its context, among other things. These changes are unsettling and can be upsetting as we strive to find a way forward in the midst of events that make headlines filled with negative energy. Even in the church we can find ourselves drawn into the downdraft of the seemingly chaotic and destructive momentum.

The magnitude of the destruction in the wake of Hurricane Harvey is unimaginable. And yet for tens of thousands of people devastated directly by Harvey, that unimaginable is their reality. The power and fury of this hurricane has been intensified by the massive populations of people in its path. Similar to the ravages of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 where lives of those in New Orleans were changed completely, there are those in Houston and its environs whose lives will never be the same, going forward.

Closer to home, and literally in our faces, is evidence of the power and fury of massive wildfires across our state and this part of the continent. The destruction of structures is particularly devastating this year. And for those who live in the areas that are burning or adjacent to them, the fear and terror are beyond our imagination.

As the ravages of the natural world impinge upon a huge population center in southeast Texas, as well as across the western US and Canada, our whole nation has been drawn in to the social upheaval in recent weeks as racism has bared its ugly face in recent events around the country. Frustration, resentment, anger and fear have bubbled up to the boiling point where it is once again center-stage.

The international and global scene seem to be as troubling as ever today as we witness and observe increased saber-rattling between nations large and small that are on hair-trigger alert. Communication which is at the heart of diplomacy seems to be taking a back seat to displays of power and tit for tat jockeying among the major world powers. And the war in Afghanistan—by far the longest war in our nation's history—is completely confounding as a solution seems totally elusive.

In all of these challenges, as well as in others not mentioned, there are those who seek to respond to make sense and provide explanation. Sometimes this is productive and helpful. Many times it simply fans the flames even more as they play right into the fear and threat that are posed by many of these perplexing problems.

Again, whenever the stability and level of relative calm in our culture is stirred or shaken, the Christian church has not only the opportunity, but the obligation to step forward and speak its voice amidst the cacophony of other voices clamoring for attention.

One of the earliest words that was used to describe the Christian church as it came into being is a word that means “called out.” In that first century context, that called out meant called out of the world as it was known. It meant that those who followed Christ were called out to proclaim an alternative message in the face of the dominant culture. It meant that early Christians were called out

to witness to a new way of understanding the God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, and Jacob, Rachel and Leah. Christians were called out to demonstrate a new way of living in this world.

This is what the apostle Paul was proclaiming to the early Christians in Rome. He was calling them out of the culture and calling them to adopt, appropriate and embrace a new way of living. Rome was the seat of the most powerful empire of the day in the western world at that time. Its culture would have been dominant to the point of oppressing any major alternative cultural ways or expressions that may have seemed too counter cultural or threatening to the prevailing ways.

One part of this letter to the Romans is reminiscent of that famous “love chapter”—chapter 13—in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthian Christians. And although it is not inappropriate to apply this to the love between 2 people that is celebrated at a wedding, it’s really more fully referring to the love that we share within the community and beyond. “Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.” (Romans 12:9-11)

Paul here, as he does elsewhere, is doubling down on the unconditional nature of pure love, genuine love. Paul is calling us to express our love in an unconditional way, not making our loving in any way a result or even a benefit of love first directed toward us by others.

While this first part of Paul’s words that we just read have sharp applicability to life within and among the Christian community, he goes on with some words that have more to do with how the Christian community is to conduct itself within the larger community.

“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” (Romans 12: 14-18)

As I have read and pondered these words this week, I am hard-pressed to find a statement of living that is more in contrast to the prevailing tenor in our country today. We as the people of God in 2017 are being called out of the world we live in today—not to abandon it, but rather to transform it.

What would it mean for us to transform our knee-jerk reaction of tit for tat to those who persecute us, to a reaction that breaks that cycle—the downward spiraling cycle—with a response of blessing, or at least with an openness to interact and converse and potentially to understand one another? We as members of the Christian community are called out to this very way of living.

To live in that blessing with others means that we rejoice with those who rejoice. It means that we weep with those who weep. It means that we live in harmony with one another.

As was mentioned here last Sunday, the speaker at the MSU fall convocation this year was Bryan Stevenson, an attorney who has devoted his life to changing the criminal justice system. He challenged the incoming MSU students to believe that they can change the world. The first step toward that goal, he said, is to get proximate with—get close to—the poor and needy in our world. He could have quoted Paul here, “Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly.”

As called out Christians we must resist the movements and efforts around us to segment and divide communities so that people are solely with others like them. Rather than understanding diversity and complexity as those things that make for a productive and vital community, sameness, similarity

and uniformity are often becoming more highly valued. This can lead to unnecessary division, strife and conflict.

The last words for today, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” (Romans 12:21)

When we in the Christian community live our lives called out by the Holy Spirit to this alternative way of being and doing, we become a distinct community. No longer is our identification as Christian just another of the many badges that we wear along with others. It becomes *the* identifying and defining mark on each of us.

Theologian Eleazar S. Fernandez puts it this way. “What is this life that is lived differently through the power of the Spirit? Broadly, a life lived differently is not different from this life here; rather, it is the power that makes our life here different.” (*Feasting on the Word*, Year A., vol. 4, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., 2011 Westminster John Knox Press, p. 16)

That’s another way to say that as God’s called out people, we’re called to live our lives in a way that becomes inviting to others. Our living as God’s called out people, in the midst of the world rife with fear and violence and poverty, is to inspire curiosity and to inspire a desire to join us on the Christian journey.

Today, marks the end of summer around here. And it also is the last Sunday that we’re doing things the way we have been, at least for awhile.

Next Sunday we are beginning an emphasis that we’ll be pursuing for the next 9 months in our church family—in our worship life, in our Sunday school, in our fellowship and in the way we present ourselves to the world. We’re calling it a “Year of Call.” It is going to be an adventure for us that builds on this idea that we’re called as a church, as the apostle Paul has reminded us, and that we’re called as individuals to lives of meaning and purpose.

We will launch this Year of Call with a guest speaker in worship next Sunday. Professor David Henderson, from MSU, a man of depth and wisdom and of faith will set the stage for us, so to speak, as we move into this exciting emphasis. I hope you can plan to be here next week and be ready to engage in this journey together.

One of the most distinctive marks of the Christian church is hospitality in which we offer the love and care and justice of Jesus to the world. May all that we do from this day forward, be a renewal of that covenant of offering the hospitality of Jesus.