

Kate Heinzl, pastor UMC

Mark 12

'Which commandment is the first of all?' Jesus answered, 'The first is, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." The second is this, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these.'

Chapter 12 (*Scholars Version*)

So, I appeal to you, friends, as recipients of the wondrous mercy of God, to dedicate every fiber of your being to a life that is consecrated and pleasing to God, which is what enlightened worship ought to be.

Don't accept the life of this age as your model, but let yourselves be remodeled by the recovery of your true mind, so that you can discern what is consistent with God's purposes - what is good, worthwhile, and completely genuine.

So as one whom God has favored with the gift of my calling, I say to every single one of you: don't entertain any false sense of superiority, but be realistic in your self-estimation, according as God has assigned to each of you a particular ability to express what living with complete confidence in God means.

Just as each of us has one body with many parts that do not all have the same function, so although there are many of us, we are Christ's body, interrelated with one another. We have different capabilities according to the gifts with which God has endowed us. If your gift is prophecy, then prophesy in a way that reflects your confidence in and reliance upon God. If your gift is providing service, then serve. If you can teach, then teach. If you are good at exhortation, you should offer encouragement. The one who is able to contribute money should do so generously. The one who gives aid should do so willingly. The one who does deeds of compassion should do so cheerfully.

Make sure that your love is without pretense; abhor what is evil; stick closely to what is good. Be devoted to one another as members of the same family. Take the initiative in honoring one another. Don't let your enthusiasm fade; radiate the presence of God's power; serve our lord. Be joyful in your hope; be patient in adversity; be persistent in prayer. Treat the needs of Christ's people as your own; take hospitality seriously.

Ask for God's blessing on those who harass you; ask for God's blessing, not God's curse on them. Celebrate with those who have something to be happy about; commiserate with those who are in sorrow. Treat one another as equals. Don't entertain notions of your superiority; on the contrary, associate with ordinary people. Don't become wise in your own eyes. Don't repay anyone who has injured you by injuring them; instead, focus on what is honorable in the eyes of all people. If possible

- insofar as it depends on you - be at peace with all people. Don't try to retaliate on your own, dear friends, but leave that to God's just indignation, because scripture says, "Justice is my business; I will put things right," says the Lord. But (so far as you are concerned) as scripture says, "If your enemy is hungry, give him something to eat, and if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; because if you do this, you will pile red hot coals [of shame?] on his head." So don't let yourselves be defeated by what is evil, but defeat what is evil with what is good.

SERMON:

When cleaning out an attic storage space recently, I found a packet of letters. Letters from my kids when they were young - one from one of my sons - he was probably 6 - not sure if it was a birthday card, but in big block letters, it said "I love you even when you yell" and then had a certificate I could redeem for help cleaning up the house. I wonder if I ever cashed that in... Makes me laugh and cry.

Alongside those, is a treasure trove I didn't know existed - a collection of letters my not-yet-husband sent me during our courtship. Weekly letters while we lived on different coasts - newsy - a lot about life on the farm and his work, with a few lines sprinkled in about our deepening relationship. What a find. I wish I had the ones I sent to him during those months apart - lost somewhere along the way.

Handwritten notes and letters - what a gift!

Every letter we receive, no matter when it was written, has a very specific audience and context. A letter from a child, and one from a sweetheart - both deeply personal, and oh, so different.

The portion of scripture we're going to spend some time with today - the 12th chapter of the letter Paul penned to the Romans has a very specific audience and context.

Written about 56 CE, somewhere around 25 years after the death of Jesus - it's one of the last letters written by Paul, and his longest letter - coming at a pivotal moment both in his life and in the developing Jesus movement.

And it's written to a community he has never met.

Did you know that? Paul has yet to spend time with the church in Rome. Knows them only from hearing from others. At the end of this letter he tells them that he hopes to finally be with them in person and spend time with them on his next missionary journey.

This church in Rome was started by other missionaries, and has significant struggles at the time of this letter - both externally and internally. They likely have heard a lot about Paul, but have never heard him preach, never shared a meal together. Don't have a connection with him as a person.

This long letter has many functions, one of which is to introduce himself, another, to lay out his theology.¹

During Paul's time, while there were some 2 million Jews in Israel, there were more than 4 million around the Mediterranean, due to extensive missionary outreach.

There may have been 15,000-16,000 Jews living in Rome during the first century.²

Millions of Jews scattered across the Roman empire.

Within Judaism, the Christ-following sub-group faced tensions with other Jewish communities.

Paul was a Jew who saw this Christ-following subgroup as an authentic expression of Judaism and understood his mission to be one of bringing about the fullness of God for the benefit of *all people*;

Paul engaged in outreach to all humans - Gentiles included - believing that in Jesus the restoration of God's kingdom had dawned. And yet was NOT seeking to found a new religion.

So there's quite a tension in Rome, and elsewhere around the Mediterranean, between Jews who saw Jesus as the fulfillment of God's promises, and those who did not.

Then there's the tensions between the Jewish believers and the Gentiles who were turning to this message of Jesus as the fulfillment of God's promises.

Many scholars believe the intended audience of this letter was primarily to those Christ-following Gentiles in Rome.

Paul wrote to them, believing these Gentiles needed to understand **how** they should live **as well as how they should interact** with the Jewish community, which was larger than their own subgroup.

¹ <https://universitybaptistchurch.com/sermons/1615/>

² Dewey, Arthur; Hoover, Roy; McGaughy, Lane and Schmidt, Daryl, eds. 2010. *The Authentic Letters of Paul*. Polebridge Press.

Paul writes this letter to prevent further deterioration in the relationships between Christ-follower Gentiles, who are resentful that their claims for full inclusion are not accepted, and the Jews who refuse to welcome them as equals.

These Gentiles felt as though they didn't belong, and are tempted to believe they are called to replace the Jews.

No, no, no, says Paul - instead of helping the gospel flourish, Paul reminds them that these attitudes undermine God's designs, and so he writes to change their attitudes.

Central to his message: The community is to be the 'good news' to one another - and so be a light to all the nations.³

And so here we are, in chapter 12, we are in the final portion of this lengthy letter, where Paul's vision of God meets the ordinary demands of life together.

START READING

Romans 12: 1-10

So, I appeal to you, friends, as recipients of the wondrous mercy of God, to dedicate every fiber of your being to a life that is consecrated and pleasing to God, which is what enlightened worship ought to be. (Scholars Version)

(My thoughts injected into reading)

“to dedicate every fiber of your being to a life that is consecrated and pleasing to God,

You might be more familiar with the translation that says:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. (NRSV)

To present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God...

What might this mean? Presenting our bodies as a living sacrifice - dedicating every fiber of ourselves to a life that honors God -

Paul seems to be saying:

The Christian life is not a one time thing.

³ Levine, Amy-Jill and Brettler, Marc Zvi, editors. 2011. *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (introduction to Romans written by Mark Nanos). Oxford University Press.

Worship doesn't happen in a certain space, it's about daily life. The manner in which we conduct ourselves is how we praise God.

And, how we act; our actions are to be grounded in God's mercy.

Dedicating every fiber of our being - presenting ourselves as an offering -
It's a Communal act that's lived out.

CATHY to read:

Don't accept the life of this age as your model, but let yourselves be remodeled by the recovery of your true mind, so that you can discern what is consistent with God's purposes - what is good, worthwhile, and completely genuine.

So as one whom God has favored with the gift of my calling, I say to every single one of you: don't entertain any false sense of superiority, but be realistic in your self-estimation, according as God has assigned to each of you a particular ability to express what living with complete confidence in God means.

Don't entertain false superiority. Be realistic in your self-estimation...

For Paul, living in solidarity with Christ does not allow for moral superiority.

That's the old way - that's still living in the old world of power and control. As those of us with privileges of all sorts - whiteness, economic security... This is one for us to be particularly aware of.

Don't entertain false superiority. Be realistic in your self-estimation -

Beware of taking power at the cost of others, but also, don't under-estimate your abilities.

Be realistic. Each one of us - each and every one, has gifts to share -

Paul reminds us that EACH of us has a vital role to play in this work:

CATHY to read:

Just as each of us has one body with many parts that do not all have the same function, so although there are many of us, we are Christ's body, interrelated with one another. We have different capabilities according to the gifts with which God has endowed us. If your gift is prophecy, then prophesy in a way that reflects your confidence in and reliance upon God. If your gift is providing service, then serve. If you can teach, then teach. If you are good at exhortation, you should offer encouragement. The one who is able to contribute money should do so generously. The one who gives aid should do so willingly. The one who does deeds of compassion should do so cheerfully.

Paul never forgets that we do not just exist as individuals in our individual bodies. We exist as members of the body of Christ.

He's reminding us that this living out of the Christian self is achieved in community. It's not a self-help activity. It happens *within* the body of Christ.

Many parts - parts that are interrelated AND different. Use **your own God given** gifts.

CATHY to read:

Make sure that your love is without pretense; abhor what is evil; stick closely to what is good. Be devoted to one another as members of the same family.

Yes, we exist as members of the body of Christ - members of the same family.

We can do those things alone,
but we do them with more discernment and impact as part of a larger body.
None of us can do it all.
No single community can do it all, either.
But God empowers each community to do all it is called to do in its context.

*Dedicate every fiber of your being to a life that is consecrated and pleasing to God...
Although there are many of us, we are Christ's body, interrelated with one another....
Make sure that your love is without pretense...
Be devoted to one another as members of the same family...*

Paul's vision of the body of believers - of the church - it seems, is that this group of Christ-followers - it's not a noun, not a thing, not a place or just a group of people, insiders, outsiders,

but a verb - the church, the body is **to be a living offering to God**.⁴

To be a living offering to God -

On a chilly mid-December day at a downtown convenience store in El Paso Texas, María paced anxiously in the cold, scanning people arriving at a nearby bus station.⁵

She wore a short coat, black jeans and sneakers, keeping her bare hands in her pockets for warmth. A light Red Cross blanket sat folded nearby as she kept her eye on the bus station.

"I'm waiting for my husband", she told a reporter, "I haven't heard from him in three days".

⁴ [Commentary on Romans 12:1-8 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#)

⁵ <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/desperate-migrants-border-texas-cold-no-shelters-rcna62166>

The couple had traveled for 21 days from Nicaragua and were among the hundreds of men, women and children who have recently crossed the Texas-Mexican border.

Maria and her husband were picked up by border officers. She was processed and then released. But she had no information on the fate of her husband. Because their country is not accepting back its citizens, Nicaraguans are sometimes able to enter the U.S. and seek asylum.

Refugees permitted in places such as El Paso are often bussed from the Border Patrol processing center and left near places like Annunciation House, a Catholic-based place of refuge committed to accompanying the marginalized and vulnerable.

Like María, other refugees are waiting, sleeping on streets. Men and women are seen shivering in blankets while they try to figure out how to reach relatives or friends far from the border. There is relief in finally reaching the U.S., but also confusion and fear about what is next.

Teresa Perez was at Annunciation House recently, having arrived after a month-long trip from Nicaragua. Once there, she was hit with the grim reality of limits to charity beyond community groups, unsure what to do, not having the money to make the trip to other parts of Texas to stay with family or friends.

What to do with such stories?

Paul calls us to:

Be devoted to one another as members of the same family...

To always remember that, although there are many of us, we are Christ's body, interrelated with one another....

Paul reminds us that this commitment to being church is not about just showing up to a building - it's a call to action - to live the verb of church - to dedicate every fiber of our being to a life that is pleasing to God.

Paul penned these words nearly 2,000 years ago. And yet they are relevant for us today.

They are a reminder to use our gifts, no matter what they are.

I love this quote - an African proverb often quoted by the Dalai Lama:

“If you think you are too small to make a difference, you haven't spent the night with a mosquito.”

Never too small to make a difference. Hopefully a difference which eases suffering.

As part of my sabbatical, I'll be spending 2 weeks at Annunciation House - making sandwiches, doing laundry - as a non-Spanish speaker, I will watch, learn, listen with the ear of my heart - and hopefully, just maybe, live out the verb of the church - to bring my self, and each of you, as the body of which I am a part - to this work.

So, I appeal to you, friends, as recipients of the wondrous mercy of God, to dedicate every fiber of your being to a life that is yours to live - whatever part of the body you were created to be -

Archbishop Desmond Tutu says it like this:

“Do your little bit of good where you are;

it's those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world.”⁶

⁶ [Desmond Tutu Quotes - BrainyQuote](#)