

Summing it all Up

Romans 12:9-21

Rev. Nick Larson

Some of you may be aware that a group of American Evangelical pastors and leaders put out a statement this week that they innocuously called "The Nashville Statement" named after the town it was written in. My friend Angela Denker characterized it best when she said "Like an old country song, it was sad and tragic with a touch of folksiness. Unlike an old country song, it had no respect for God."

This week like many of you, I stared at images of people in Houston paddling kayaks, operating speedboats and even using Jetski's in waist-high water, rescuing babies and senior citizens and puppies, and entire families from one of the most horrific hurricanes in recent US History.

The audacity in these images show us, at a time when we might need it most, what our nation can be. In the stories of Hurricane Harvey, Southern Whites, Latinos, African Americans, Chinese immigrants, everyone had a story and everyone wanted to help. The ugliness and division of Charlottesville could not douse the average American's desire to reach out and help love a neighbor.

Seeing it, the rescues as well as the tragedies - watching story after story of how hurricanes impact everyone (but money makes it easier to recover) - I witnessed once again the capacity of human beings to love, to risk for one another. That is the image of God within us all.

And then, I read this so-called Nashville Statement, and I realized that America's some of the most prominent Christian voices needed to read our lectionary text for this week.

Their statement is so full of fear and dismissive language that tore down instead of lifted up. It is a sad defensive crouch, where they backed into a corner, rely on the same scapegoats that they have for years. It begins by dismissing fellow human beings and unabashedly denying the personhood of others, all while ignoring Paul's call for love to be genuine. Paul calls us to love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another showing honor.

Their statement does neither. It seeks only to push others out, which is heartbreaking.

Because Paul has just spent 11 chapters expounding on the extending on God's inclusive grace, seeking to express how grace is open to all. Paul has spent it countering the notion, or narrative, that the one particular group (in the first century Jews) were left out of this love covenant. Paul has said repeatedly, that this good news of Jesus is not reserved for some while condemning of others. He has spent chapters 9, 10 and 11 stating clearly that this love encompasses all.

Our twelfth chapter then begins (before our verses this morning) with the great 'therefore.' Essentially "Here are the implications." In our text this week, a minimalist count discovers *twenty-three separate imperatives*. Twenty three imperatives!

Most of them are a treasure trove for those Christian stores where the embroider verses on little pillows and stickers and what not. "Let love be genuine" or "love one another with mutual affection" or "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." All good things.

Yet not even the most enthusiastic, careful preacher (such as myself), would dare attempt working through all twenty-three imperatives individually in a sermon. Yet, Paul, the master weaver shapes each imperative action into the basis for an intricate pattern of the tapestry of the collective life of faith.

So, while much is packed in here and we Christians we are called to do all these things. Know that Paul sums it all up into a through thread. Paul spools plenty of practical specifics about vengeance, and harmony, and what to do with and for our enemies. Yet, he threads each under the auspices of mutual love.

Although it is important to note that though Roman Christians would later face fierce persecution at the hands of the Emperor Nero and the Roman Empire, Paul's letter was written before this fate. As a result, the evil that he is addressing is not of an outside force seeking to defeat the Christians but, rather, of the subtler, though perhaps just as dangerous, pressure of their own neighbors, family and friends.

The suffering that Paul addresses in our text, is a suffering caused by the experience of the Roman Christians finding themselves on the “outside” of their social circles due to their new religious beliefs that forbid the worship of idols. Family members, coworkers, and neighbors who had not converted would not have understood and would not have approved of the new behaviors of their Christian counterparts who refused to attend public events, many of which were deeply integrated with a sort of idol worship.

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. While the issue today may not so clearly be idol worship, Christians who seek to follow the commandments of love often find themselves on the other side of the most vocal Christian leadership, the ones declaring that they represent the rest of us, and more critically the voice of Jesus.

So in the wake of our political climate in the United States and a renewed public outcry against anyone who differs in opinion, Paul’s words to the Romans are as timely as ever. In the midst of this human temptation toward disparagement or retribution, this discourse on love provides a timely call to what Paul refers to in 1 Corinthians as a ‘still more excellent way (12:31.)’

To be clear, Paul’s exhortations to ‘love one another with mutual affection and to ‘live in harmony with one another’ leave no room for debate on some issues. Hate speech is wrong, not only wrong but is evil. Evil is the expression of the ultimate disconnection of one human being from another or from other groups of human beings. And Paul also states clearly what we need to do with evil in our text as well.

Statements like the so-called Nashville one, or the marches in Charlottesville where the name and symbol of Christ is being manipulated away from the love Paul is speaking too here, are evil.

And as much Paul says we should ‘live in harmony’ don’t mistake that for silence. Paul still argues that evil must be answered, and that silence is not the answer.

However, rather than 'repay anyone evil for evil' as actions (though sometimes tempting) Paul exhorts us to 'take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.'

I was having a conversation with a congregation member this week and we were talking about how much we each miss places to have honest public discourse. Public discourse has been turned into issuing dismissive statements and shouting slogans across protest lines, airways, and dinner tables at one another.

We, church, are called to be a place where that changes. Where discourse is welcome, yet not hate or hate speech, but discourse. Yet, the problem remains what does that look like for us in Columbia? At Broadway?

How do we the church thrive in the midst of the hate-filled, divisive rhetoric in which we continue to find ourselves? Is there anything that can be considered as Paul asks of us here 'good in the sight of all people'? How might Christians, called not to be silent, but rather to respond to hatred with goodness, promote this kind of love and harmony?

Which returns us to Paul's 23 imperatives, they are the ground rules Paul establishes for this 'still more excellent community.'

We need to be rejoicing in hope. Continue to be patient in suffering, and persevering in prayer. To continue to make sure that our love is genuine. That we are, to be continually, holding fast to that which is good.

Which is hard. Right?

Every year at the beginning of Wednesday Night Lives, we begin by setting some ground rules, by talking about our behavioral covenant. I'm sure a lot of you have been part of a group that began that way.

It's a way that we basically say to one another, that this is how we are gonna be together. And for the last three years of Wednesday's we've created a group art project, as a way of signing off on a set of terms much like this passage.

This passage is sorta Paul saying, okay church, this is the way we need to be together. This is gonna describe who we are (or at very least who we should be).

The great Eleazar Fernandez, a professor up at United Theological Seminary in the twin cities, says *"The greater the tension between a faith community and the surrounding world, the more sharply defined is the identity and character of the community. While no faith community is completely outside the mold of its surrounding society, the early Christian communities were actively self-aware of their identity and calling as 'alternative societies' vis-a-vis the wider world, particularly the imperial Roman context. They wrestled not only with how to stand in contrast to the imperial Roman system of privilege, power, and social conformity, but also how to live differently as communities defined by the life and teachings of the crucified One."*

Too often the wider church is bemoaning the overall decline in numbers, and begins to fall into the trappings where Worship gets confused with marketing, stewardship get confused with fund-raising, spirituality with meditations techniques, vitality with growth, and ministry with programs and services. Programs and services are good to have, as you can tell, we have plenty of them around here... but they often become the tail that wags the dog.

Too often the church starts to act like we want to be more like the surrounding culture, rather than a better version of it. That's why I was so impressed with our board leadership and our elders who unanimously stood up reaffirming publicly our stance against racism and bigotry, through our new statement.

Broadly, a life lived here differently is not better from any other life; rather, it is the power of God's hospitality that makes our lives here different. And so we, Broadway, must be vigilant in our extending of that hospitality.

Hospitality as genuine love must be the true distinctive mark of the church, of our church, which was born out of hospitality and spread because of hospitality.

This is my problem with the tone deaf statement issued by those evangelical leaders. Personally and theologically I disagree with almost all of their statement, but that's not my issue. Christians are welcome to a different interpretation than I have. It is their lack of radical hospitality, their lack of genuine love that discourages me.

Instead, we are called to be the kind of church that doesn't just respond with more hatred against hatred or simply kindness against need. Hospitality does not mean simply welcoming anyone into our congregation and doing charitable acts, important as they are. We are called to move beyond hospitality as charity, to radical hospitality as acts of justice.

Hospitality as charity offers crumbs from our tables; radical hospitality as justice offers a place at the table.

Charity in the context of this so-called Nashville statement is denying those who follow Jesus differently than you do in defence of a theology. Radical hospitality involves transformation of our church systems to give power to those who have been excluded and victimized.

Charity in the context of Charlottesville Protests is wishing we were done with the evils of supremacy; radical hospitality involves changing the very systems of oppression that benefit some more than others.

Charity in the context of Hurricane Harvey is texting a dollar or donating your pocket change to the relief efforts (which you should absolutely do just to be clear). Radical Hospitality would be work to establish a substantial yearly contributions to a struggling partner congregation within the disaster area, or working with a sister church where we can go year after year down to work on not only the relief efforts but the years worth of recovery and rebuilding efforts.

Radical hospitality as an expression of genuine love takes the creative work of communities, like the small one in Germany the town of Wunsiedel (I'm sure I'm pronouncing that wrong). That in response to a neo-Nazi march to be held in their town, a group of organizers gathered pledges of financial support to an organization against Nazism for every meter the neo-Nazis' walked.

So as the neo-Nazis marched, they encountered writing on the street thanking them for raising so much money to fight hate. The organizers even set up water tables along the route to 'thank' the marchers, a lovely spin on Paul's command, 'if [your enemies] are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.'

Paul is calling all of us to a still more excellent way. And in this more excellent way, 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 against it with the strongest possible power - genuine love.