

Do the Work
Romans 12:9-21

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost/ 30th August 2020

These verses can sound like a long laundry list of all that is expected of us as Christians, a list of do's and don'ts. If you separate out the exhortations in Romans 12:9-21, there are approximately twenty-four commands. And these commands cannot be separated from all that comes prior in chapter twelve, beginning with, "I appeal to you therefore...by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Rom. 12:1). Paul's description of the Christian life or, perhaps better—a *life ordered by the life of Christ*—runs through chapter twelve and pours into the next chapter and beyond. Paul's point here is a simple: the life in which Jesus is Lord will take on the characteristics, the virtues, the qualities, the *life* of the risen Christ. There are certain "marks" of a Christ-follower, a particular way of relating to the world, a particular way of moving in and through the world, a distinctive way of behaving and thinking and talking and acting.

"I appeal to you, therefore...." Paul says. "Therefore" signals a turn in the letter to this struggling church in Rome. In the first half of the epistle he makes a case for the gospel. This is the good news: the faithfulness of God has been revealed to us in Christ; in Christ we see the saving power of God to redeem and to save (Romans 1-3). And if this is true, as Paul claims it is, and as the church in Rome was coming to discover, then we can't live and act the way we did before when we did not know Christ. Even now, we are being called to live informed by the transforming life of the risen Christ. So Paul invites them to participate or share in this new reality and, therefore, warns the church: "Do not be conformed to the present age, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and whole" (Rom. 12:2).¹

With the renewing of our minds and hearts our lives slowly begin to change. And only then, according to Paul, can we begin to discern the will of God, all that is good and acceptable and whole. Which brings me back to the list of exhortations in our text.

We have to be careful that we don't pull these commands out of context and turn them into a new list of virtues to live by, turning them into generic "life principles" that we will strive toward to make our lives better. Christian ethics must always have a *theological* ground. Our theology, that is how we understand the gospel—God's saving power to redeem and save—shapes our ethics and not the other way around. Our ethics, the way we live our lives and the choices we make, are ordered by the life of Christ. And our ability to live a Christian ethic is directly related to the ongoing "renewing of our minds" through the work of the Holy Spirit, who enables us to grow deeper (or grow up) into the knowledge of God and discern God's will and discover all that is good and acceptable and whole. It is impossible to live the Christian life on our own, without help. For Christ's way does not come naturally to us; it's not in our nature to live his way.

And yet—

And yet, here's the paradoxical aspect of the Christian life, neither are we completely passive to the Spirit's ministrations. We Protestants love to talk about grace, and rightly so. We get nervous if anything smacks of "works righteousness" (Titus 3:5-7), meaning we are saved by our good works and not by the power of grace. It's true. We're not saved by "works," but by grace (Ephesians 2:8-9). But this doesn't mean there isn't work for us to do. It's not an invitation to do nothing, to be passive, leave it all up to grace. In fact, grace has a way of enabling us to do the work that we couldn't or wouldn't even attempt to do previously. Grace frees us to work. Grace facilitates our capacity to do God's work. Grace grants agency, the ability to be productive, creative, and useful, living the lives that our souls long to live, lives that reflect the good and serve the good. Grace frees us to work with joy and gratitude and not from anxiety. And then the work of our lives bears witness to the presence of the Living Christ.

As I read and reread over these verses this week, I found these words welling up within me: *do the work*. That's what I heard Paul saying to the fledgling church in Rome—and to us. Just do the work. Do *your* work. Figure it out.

And it's not easy. When you dig down deep and listen to what Paul is saying here, and then imagine what it must have been like to be a member of a church trying to follow Christ living in Rome, the capital of the largest empire the world had ever seen, it wasn't easy. The church in Rome grew out of the small, yet vibrant Jewish community that lived along the Tiber River. The Jews were a marginal group in Rome, many were enslaved by Rome and forced to leave Jerusalem after the Roman legions destroyed the temple in 70 AD. The followers of Christ were a minority within a minority—which is good reminder for us that the gospels and letters of the New Testament, indeed most of the Bible, is really minority literature, these are the writings of a marginalized group of people. The Bible was never the text of a majority (that only came much later).

With this in mind we begin to see that what Paul expected from this small group of Christ-followers in Rome was astonishing, really. It was bold, radical, risky, countercultural. From the perspective of the Romans, it was ludicrous, unconventional, at odds with the powers that be, at odds with the prevailing ethic of the Roman Empire, which was built on brute force and domination. Consider this, then. Paul writes to the church in the capital city of the Roman Empire: "Let love—*agape*—be genuine; abhor what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor" (Rom. 12: 9-10).²

Genuine *agape* means love that is authentic, real, without deceit or deception. Genuine here means what you say and do in public correlates with what you say or do in private. In a society built upon deception, the Christian loves genuinely—without dissimulation, to use an archaic word.³

And love—*agape*—is going to be needed to withstand all that is evil in the empire. This isn't sentimental love or romantic love, it's a different kind of love. It's a force and it's fierce and it's strong. In Graham Greene's (1904-1991) novel *The Power and the Glory*, the Mexican priest sitting in jail tries to describe God's love to his jailer without faith. It's often unrecognizable, the priest says, "it might even look like hate, it would be enough to scare us—God's love. It set fire to a bush in the desert, didn't it, and smashed open graves and set the dead walking in the

dark.”⁴ It’s powerful. It’s unsettling. It’s disturbing. It’s never what we expect. “Love is as strong as death” (Song of Solomon 8:6).

It’s the kind of love required to face the evil in the world. The Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968), in his magisterial commentary on Romans, which upended the theological world when it was first published in 1918, said, “Only the love which is strong enough to abhor that which is evil can cleave to that which is good.”⁵ And we, as Christ’s people, are called to cleave to the good, to strive after the good—not “be” good, no one is truly “good” (Mark 10:18), but strive after *the* good. The good is what every human hungers for, a good that can be shared collectively, not just for some, not only for those with power or in power or the rich, but for everyone. This, too, was at odds with the way the Romans organized their society.

Indeed, in Roman society, which was an honor-shame culture, public shame was used to control people and get people to conform. Paul knows that *agape* undercuts the inherent evil in the shame-honor system, as Jesus himself had shown with his life.⁶ *Agape* dismantles this distorted ethic and offers a “still more excellent way” (1 Cor. 12:31). Paul calls them to outdo one another, even make a game out of it, in honoring everyone—not only in the church, but in society (Rom. 12:10).

We can go through the rest of this text and see how Paul’s appeal to do the work is difficult and challenging. I’m only scratching the surface. These verses serve as a wonderful summary of what we’re called to be as followers of Christ, both individually and collectively within the congregation, but also individually, personally as we live and serve and strive to be faithful in society in any age, including ours. In this challenging age we are called to do the work. In fact, I would like us to focus on this text between now and the end of the year, until Advent, and allow it to shape our life together, both individually and collectively. We will revisit this text many times between now and the end of the year. It’s clear there’s work to do. We—you—need to figure out what *your* work is.

And it’s worth remembering that this text, this focus or conversation I’m inviting us to enter, is also an opportunity for us to be humble, to exercise humility. We are all works in progress, aren’t we? We’re under construction or reconstruction. This is a good reminder because there are plenty of folks around who think they already know how to be a follower of Christ and have nothing more to learn. Don’t believe them.

During the Reformation, when Martin Luther (1483-1546) challenged the censure of his teachings by Pope Leo X, he leaned into the idea that life is a process of becoming. “This life is not righteous,” he said, “but growth in righteousness; is not health, but healing; not being, but becoming; not rest, but exercise; we are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it; the process is not yet finished, but it is going on; this is not the end, but it is the road; all does not yet gleam in glory, but all is being purified.”⁷ This didn’t sit well with the powers that be. Luther was excommunicated from the church within months.

This reminds me of something the poet and novelist Maya Angelou (1928-2014) once said about her faith. “I’m working at trying to be a Christian and that’s serious business.” She said, “It’s not something where you think, ‘Oh, I’ve got it done. I did it all day—hot diggity.’”

The truth is, all day long you try to do it, try to be it. And then in the evening, if you're honest and have a little courage, you look at yourself and say, 'Hmmm. I only blew it 86 times. Not bad.' I'm trying to be a Christian," she confessed. Then she said—I love this—"I'm always amazed . . . when [people] walk up to me and say, 'I'm a Christian.' I always think, 'Already? You've already got it? My goodness, you're fast.'"⁸

Already?

Already?

There's so much work still to do.

¹ Most translations read, "Do not be conformed to this world..." however the Greek is *aion* (αἰών), meaning "the present age," not "world." And "whole," instead of "perfect," is a better translation of the Greek word *teleios* (τέλειος).

² Most translations read "hate what is evil," but the King James Version use of "abhor" is better.

³ According to Google, the word "dissimulation" was in common use in American English in the early 1800s; it's rarely used today but it's probably the best translation of the Greek *anupokritos* (ἀνυπόκριτος).

⁴ Graham Greene, *The Power and the Glory* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990 [1940]), 199-200.

⁵ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1980 [1921]), 454.

⁶ See Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993)

⁷ "Defense and Explanation of All Articles," or sometimes "An Argument in Defense of All Articles of Dr. Martin Luther which were Unjustly Condemned by the Roman Bull, 1521." Luther wrote this in response to Pope Leo X's bull *Exsurge Domine*, which condemned forty-one of Luther's theses as "heretical or scandalous or false."

⁸ Cited in Peter W. Marty, "The life of faith takes practice," *Christian Century*, October 17, 2018: <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/publisher/life-faith-takes-practice>