

Sermon Text – Sunday, August 30, 2026 – Pastor Paula Kraus

1st Reading: Exodus 3:1-15; 2nd Reading: Mathew 16:21-28
Scripture for the Message: Romans 12:9-21 “Grace and Peace”

In these words, I imagine a message of grace and peace, in fact for almost all of Paul's letters he begins with words similar to “Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.” Reading this section of Paul's letter to the Roman churches – my mind wants to summarize his words into these points:

- We are all in this together so give grace.
- let your love of neighbor be real, stop pretending.
- don't think your particular burden is greater than any others'.
- respect what others believe is good.
- be hospitable and help those who need help.
- live at peace and leave retribution to God.

The version of scripture we read in this church labels this section of Romans “Love in Action” and the New Revised Standard Version of scripture that I use for study labels these same verses “Marks of a True Christian.” Both labels fit – love in action is the mark of a true Christian. Let's look at what Paul is teaching.

The first part of Romans 12, what we read last week, informs us of the new life we have through Christ. Now we arrive at what Paul thinks should be our response to that new life. A response that results in diverse virtues distinguished by genuine agape love. That is love without hypocrisy and without indifference to others. Paul's words tell us what Christian love, love of neighbor and of self, looks like. In our gospel reading from Matthew Jesus tells his followers to take up their cross to follow him – and it fits with what Paul writes here regarding genuine agape love and self-sacrifice. Paul isn't talking about warm fuzzy feelings for others – but true love and devotion like to the members of your own family.

We are all in this together, so give grace. Paul encourages the church in Rome to continue in their zeal and fire in the Spirit. His words are a reminder to not lose hope, even in your suffering be patient because God is with you – you are not alone. It is hard to be patient, but Paul has already reminded us that good things come according to God's will and with God's timing – “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him. . .” Now he reminds us to “keep your spiritual

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fervor, serving the Lord." Putting that into the vernacular of our time – "Keep the Faith!"

Many years ago, I worked for a Healthcare facility in Florida that struggled – part of the struggle was because each individual department within that facility acted as if they were alone in the struggle – they were blinded to what the rest of the facility was experiencing. Administration attempted to alleviate the problem by switching staff around and job sharing. They also implemented what the staff called "be nice" classes. Paul's message is for Christians to "be nice" to everyone – live in harmony, bless, and do not curse, shape your intentions to conform to grace and peace, unfortunately for a lot of us those intentions do not come naturally.

Notice Paul writes in verse eighteen, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." We cannot force others to live in peace; we are only responsible for ourselves. As far as you are able, live in peace. Consider it a warning and know that peace must not be gained at the expense of what is good and right. Continue doing what is good and right, not paying evil for evil, and live in peace – as far as it is within your power to do so. I believe verse eighteen is the key to this whole passage, I have read three different translations of this passage and all three have this verse worded the same way – that indicates its importance to Paul's message. If it is possible and as far as it depends on you live at peace!

Paul follows that with "Beloved [my dear friends] never avenge yourselves but leave room for the wrath of God." This should be common sense for those who desire to live at peace with everyone – vengeance mostly leads to conflict and discord not peace. Let God deal with God's enemies – humans are prone to identify as God's enemies those who displease them and humans frequently get that wrong. We have learned from Gospel lessons that we are not capable of sorting the weeds from the wheat and Paul is telling us to not try. In what was read this morning from Matthew's gospel, Jesus tells his followers basically the same thing, "For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then HE will repay everyone for what has been done."

Paul uses a quote from Proverbs to illustrate his point, "If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head, and the Lord will reward you" (Proverbs 25:21-22). I don't think God rewards the heaping of

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burning coals as much as the restraint from claiming vengeance on our enemies. God does reward patience and perseverance but not so much revenge and retaliation.

This passage ends in verse twenty-one with the same tone as it began in verse nine. “Hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; . . . Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good.” Everything in between gives us the guidance to do just that. Verse twenty-one is the essence of what Paul is instructing about agape love. Pelegius, a monk and theologian from around the fourth or fifth century, said about this passage: “The enemy has overcome you when he makes you like himself.” The essential victory over evil is the work of love, vengeance comes from hatred and hatred is not love.

There is a strong message for the church in what Paul writes, and it comes out clearly from verses sixteen and seventeen. “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.” Don’t think that your particular burden is greater than any others’ burdens, don’t think that your particular brand of worship is any better [or worse] than any others’ brand of worship. Don’t think too highly of yourself and respect what others might also believe is good. This is certainly a message of grace and peace.

I saw this message in action during the recent Intergenerational VBS that I participated in with the Valley United Presbyterian Church, the Lutheran Church, and the Episcopal Church – there was unique cooperation among the pastors and the laypeople who organized and attended. No one “denomination” took center stage and there was participation from all the churches although I was the only one from this congregation. I would like to see that change.

When Paul writes “take thought for what is noble in the sight of all” it is a message of Christian tolerance. Maybe more than just tolerance, it is a message for unity – Christians ought to take thought for, aim at, seek, in the sight of all men those things which are good, the arbiter of good being not the moral community sense of humankind, but the gospel. Unity – as you have heard me say many times – is the foundation of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) where all are welcome at the table. When people of different faith traditions can work together such as what happened in this community in July, the broader community of non-

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church people can get a better picture of what God's kin-dom looks like. God's family is not a single community of Presbyterians, or Lutherans, or Catholics, etc. God's family will welcome all people from all nations and all faith traditions.

So, we are called to live peaceably with all – all nations and all faith traditions. We are called to overcome evil with good – seeking the good in all things. That's not always easy but maybe that is why Jesus calls on his followers to "take up their cross and follow" him. Indeed - "what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?" Are we willing to give up our place in eternity by seeking vengeance in this life? Are we willing to forfeit life in God's kingdom by excluding those who are not like us and refusing to participate in projects that benefit the whole community of believers?

When we seek to live peacefully offering grace to others, we are living the example that Jesus Christ teaches. Paul writes "Love each other like the members of your family" and I am certain he means not just those you see every day or worship with every Sunday – but each other includes the world. God is love; love others as God loves us – that is genuine love.