



“This Is What Community Looks Like”

Pastor Andy CastroLang

September 3, 2017

Scripture (CEB):

Romans 12:9-21

⁹Love should be shown without pretending. Hate evil, and hold on to what is good. ¹⁰Love each other like the members of your family. Be the best at showing honor to each other. ¹¹Don't hesitate to be enthusiastic—be on fire in the Spirit as you serve the Lord! ¹²Be happy in your hope, be patient when you're in trouble, and devote yourselves to prayer. ¹³Contribute to the needs of God's people, and welcome strangers into your home. ¹⁴Bless people who harass you—bless and don't curse them. ¹⁵Be happy with those who are happy, and cry with those who are crying. ¹⁶Consider everyone as equal, and don't think that you're better than anyone else. Instead, associate with people who have no status. Don't think that you're so smart. ¹⁷Don't pay back anyone for their evil actions with evil actions, but show respect for what everyone else believes is good.

¹⁸If possible, to the best of your ability, live at peace with all people.¹⁹Don't try to get revenge for yourselves, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath. It is written in the book of Deuteronomy, *Revenge belongs to me; I will pay it back, says the Lord.*^[a] ²⁰Instead remember the words from the book of Proverbs, *If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink. By doing this, you will pile burning coals of fire upon his head.*^[b] ²¹Don't be defeated by evil, but defeat evil with good.

Footnotes:

- a. Romans 12:19 Deut 32:35
- b. Romans 12:20 Prov 25:21-22

Sermon:

I participated in a number of Occupy protests, marches, rallies. I walked in the Women's March. I marched to protect the funding to Planned Parenthood.

Sometimes, at events like these you will see someone with a bullhorn leading songs and chants.

Back in the day, they sang, "We Shall Overcome". During the Vietnam War protests, I remember hearing, "Nixon is a bloodsucker, he shall be removed".

Well, in the Occupy protests I heard the person with the bullhorn holler, "Show me what democracy looks like"...

And the crowd would chant back, "THIS is what democracy looks like." All of us standing together, rain or shine, pushing back against Wall Street, against the oligarchy of power in America, marching and protesting and shouting back and forth. It was heartening. On some level, it was true. American democracy should listen to the voices of the people, and the people should do whatever they must to be heard in the halls of power, whether Wall Street or Washington.

The halls of power in the world of Paul and Jesus, were in Rome. And their power was imperial, not democratic. Religion, government, the armies and the social norms of Rome controlled, or suppressed the people under imperial Rome so that they might have "the great Roman peace", the "pax Romana".

People were meant to submit to certain beliefs, accept certain laws, worship under certain prescriptions.

For example:

- the male head of the household controlled the lives of all women, children, slaves and animals.
- One's status in society was directly proportional to the powerful people you knew, the patronage you received from them, or that you could offer.
- Education was prized, but was offered to only a tiny fraction of the most privileged males.
- There was limited power in society, and it was concentrated in the hands of a few, very powerful elites. They were like the 1 %, but it was an even tinier fraction of society! They held on to their power ruthlessly.
- You could worship what gods you wished, as long as you recognized the emperor as a god first.

- You could not be summarily executed if you were a Roman citizen. Anyone else, watch out!

Now, think about our friends in this letter...on so many levels, Paul is suggesting a life that is way out of step with the culture around them.

Listen: “Love should be shown without pretending. Hate evil, and hold on to what is good. ¹⁰ Love each other like the members of your family. Be the best at showing honor to each other. ¹¹ Don’t hesitate to be enthusiastic—be on fire in the Spirit as you serve the Lord! ¹² Be happy in your hope, be patient when you’re in trouble, and devote yourselves to prayer. ¹³ Contribute to the needs of God’s people, and welcome strangers into your home. ¹⁴ Bless people who harass you—bless and don’t curse them. ¹⁵ Be happy with those who are happy, and cry with those who are crying. ¹⁶ Consider everyone as equal, and don’t think that you’re better than anyone else. Instead, associate with people who have no status. Don’t think that you’re so smart. ¹⁷ Don’t pay back anyone for their evil actions with evil actions, but show respect for what everyone else believes is good. ¹⁸ If possible, to the best of your ability, live at peace with all people.”

Truly, this is a different worldview.

A subversive worldview.

And a subversive religion, therefore.

But that was so long ago, that it hardly seems to apply to us, does it?

- No one gets summarily executed in this country, right? What about black men?
- And we all have rights, to vote. Unless there is voter suppression, and gerrymandering of districts to destroy that vote.
- Education is open to all...except for the extremely high dropout rates in certain schools and parts of our country, and an illiteracy rate that keeps growing and growing!
- Religion is free and open in our country. Well, unless you wear a hijab, or are Jewish, or a Sikh in Spokane Valley...then the free practice of your religion will be attacked by others who are hateful, suspicious, bigoted.

I simply want to encourage you to see the fully subversive nature of the gospel of Jesus that Paul is sharing in this letter to the church in Rome and to the church in Spokane.

Be kind to everyone, Paul says, not merely the powerful.

In fact, go out of your way to be kind to the powerless ones; the homeless without an address and the immigrant without ID. The trans teen who has been tossed out of their home, the child who has run away from a violent home. Show them honor, Paul insists. Honor them as human beings, not as pawns in a game for power or control or money.

Be happy in hope, patient with yourself (and others) in times of trouble, and pray always...welcome strangers...bless people who harass you...consider everyone an equal...don't pay back evil actions with evil actions...show respect for what others believe to be the good.

Yes, to live this way is still deeply subversive!

For our culture is selfish and power mad, it is full of thoughtless cruelty and foolish striving after material wealth and social status or power, this culture considers human life disposable and cheap. Churches may be full of such madness too. Joel Osteen is just one such lost soul, whose priorities are so messed up by wealth and power that he has forgotten this message of Paul, who learned it from the radical, Jesus. Surrounded by suffering and need in Houston Texas, he turned his back and locked his doors.

We can do better.

We are no giant megachurch, but in our own moment and in our own town, we can help. We find ways to feed others, to help others get a bus ticket, a room somewhere safe. We find ways to help Houston and Louisiana. We find ways to be enthusiastic, when cynicism is chic. We find ways to show respect and kindness, when prejudice and callous racism are common.

You are subversives!

You are showing others what community looks like!

As Paul suggests, we must never stop with our counter cultural ways.

Instead, we will work to transform the world, and to the best of our ability, we will live at peace with all people...showing a better way, the Jesus way.

Beloved's: "show me what community looks like"!

People: "This is what community looks like"!