

September 3, 2017 • Holy Communion

## **“Going Deeper: What Is Noble in the Sight of All”**

Sermon by the Rev. Patricia Farris



*Romans 12:9-21*

*Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. 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. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

Since Hurricane Harvey made landfall, our hearts have broken over and over again at the images of the devastating storm damage, flooding, dramatic rescues, fear, desperation, and tragic loss of life. And on top of that, the realization that one of the consequences of global warming will be that the frequency of such storms will continue to rapidly accelerate.

Yet across the Houston area, another story has emerged as well, the story of neighbors helping neighbors, strangers helping strangers, stores, a bowling alley, any available dry space offered as shelter. I read about one Mexican bakery. The bakers and staff were trapped inside by the flood waters. But they had power and flour, and they stayed up all night working as hard as they could to make us much bread and pan dulces as they could before they themselves were finally rescued, bread to distribute free to stranded people in the shelters. Documented? Undocumented? Don't know. Neighbor helping neighbor.

In Houston, one of the most diverse cities in America, all the barriers of race, ethnicity, language, legal status, political party-- those barriers lost all meaning and power as neighbor reached out to neighbor. We have all been compellingly reminded that we are capable of so much more than our recent name-calling and acrimony would indicate. We are bigger than that, more than that, more noble than that.

There is much to ponder. What's happening in our nation? Is something new possible even now? And on the personal level--what am I hoping for? Where's my life going? How is my heart? How is it with my soul, as John Wesley would have asked it?

Today we're starting into a new sermon series called: “Going Deeper—Faith for such a time as this.” From what I'm hearing from you, regardless of our politics or party registration, there's a lot going on in our souls right now. As if the waters are troubled and we're experiencing pretty turbulent waves. For people of faith that's always a signal that it's time to go deep—to remember who and whose we are. To revisit the foundations of our faith. To find that peace that passes all understanding. To remember how not to be afraid. To be those whose values and dreams help steer the course of events. To go deeper, and ground ourselves in our faith.

These moments in history recur from time to time. Listen to how Albert Schweitzer put it in 1958: “We live in a time when the good faith of peoples is doubted more than ever before. Expressions throwing doubt on the trustworthiness of each other are bandied back and forth... We cannot continue in this paralyzing mistrust. If we want to work our way out of the desperate situation in which we find ourselves, another spirit must enter into the people... We must approach them in the spirit that we are human beings, all of us, and that we feel ourselves fitted to feel with each other; to think and will together in the same way.”

To invite us into a time of spiritual reflection and renewal, we're starting today in the 12th Chapter of Paul's letter to the early church in Rome. In Chapter 12, Paul begins a long discourse on the Christian life as response to God's grace, with practical instruction on how to live as members of the Body of Christ, so that the marks of a true Christian might be evidenced in us.

Some of you will remember hearing this passage read each year at our Ash Wednesday services, at which time it becomes an invitation into a way of living from which we wander from time to time. It's good to be called back, to be reminded, as Paul puts it, to “take thought for what is noble in the sight of all,” what is good, right, honorable in the sight of all.

For the Apostle Paul, this consists in being generous, self-giving, overflowing with love, meeting the other with blessing and peace, free of pride and vengeance, confident in the grace and power of God to overcome evil with good.

How do we do this? How do we get there? Sr. Joan Chittester speaks of this work as self-understanding, a commitment to spiritual growth, reminding ourselves that we are part of a spiritual tradition that has stood the test of time, in worship that points us to a spiritual “true north” and shows a path to follow.

This is internal spiritual work, the work of formation, but as Christians, it is not work we do alone. We are joined together as sisters and brothers in the Body of Christ, and so we draw strength and example from one another, especially in worship and shared prayer.

In the words of the Quaker theologian, Robert Barclay, in 1675, this spiritual formation and transformation grows: “not by strength of arguments, or by a particular disquisition of each doctrine, and convincement of my understanding thereby...; for when I came into the silent assemblies of God's people, I felt a secret power among them, which touched my heart, and as I gave way unto it, I found the evil weakening in me and the good raised up, and so I became thus knit and united unto them, hungering more and more after the increase of this power and life, whereby I might feel myself perfectly redeemed.”

John Wesley’s way of teaching this was to call us Methodists back to the basics of the spiritual life: worship, prayer, Scripture, Holy Communion.

Robert and I are just back from our annual California-Pacific Conference Clergy Convocation—two days of study, reflection, worship, and fellowship with our clergy colleagues. In one of his presentations to us, our bishop, Grant Hagiya, shared his favorite paragraph from our United Methodist Book of Discipline, which is our constitution, our rule book, if you will. He said that he loves how a local church is defined in paragraph 201. Listen--it speaks well to this community, this “school of love” in which we are nurtured and formed as Christ’s disciples: “the local church...is a community of true believers under the Lordship of Christ. It is the redemptive fellowship in which the Word of God is preached by persons divinely called and the sacraments are duly administered according to Christ’s own appointment. Under the discipline of the Holy Spirit, the church exists for the maintenance of worship, the edification of believers, and the redemption of the world.”

It is my prayer that our hearts, souls, and lives be blessed to find God’s peace and assurance in the time-honored places and practices where God’s people abide and grow—in prayer and in gathering together for worship, the sacraments, study, and fellowship. And all this, not for ourselves alone, but indeed, for the redemption of the world, our hurting, wounded, imperiled world which God so loves.

As Pope Francis has said; “our efforts must aim at restoring hope, righting wrongs, maintaining commitments, and thus promoting the well-being of individuals and of peoples.” The redemption of the world.

As we prepare our hearts to receive the sacrament this day, may we find the faith we seek for the living of these days, the light, wisdom, and that spiritual “true north” that is found in God.

AMEN

Notes:

Albert Schweitzer. Peace or Atomic War. Three addresses given in 1958.

Joan Chittester. Radical Spirit: 12 Ways to Live a Free and Authentic Life. New York: Convergent Books, 2017.

N.T. Wright. Twelve Months of Sundays. New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2012.