

The One Anothers -Week 4 - Live In Harmony  
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Romans 12:9-18

Here we are in week 4 of the One Anothers, a series of sermons meant more to get you thinking than to answer any questions. And the topic is : the way in which the Body of Christ, the church, is supposed to behave toward and treat one another. Those are the higher goals of Christian community, but first we have get past the rushing free-fall of everything else. How can we find the deeper life, the connected community life, when we're so busy trying not to plummet to our destruction?

I'll bet the disciples felt that way and pretty often.

When worship ends and the rest of your week gets under way, then what? When Jesus steps away and raw life rushes in, what happens? What's that like when we lose sight of the Lord? For the disciples it was always a little dicey.

When Jesus stepped away, they forgot how to pray. They couldn't do healings right. They confused the kingdom of God (a place of equity) with the Roman Legion (a place of rank and power). They got hungry and couldn't find the bread of life. They were even frightened by the weather. And the thing is, Jesus continually came back. Throughout the narratives of the Gospel, Jesus returns to rescue, to bless, to teach and nurture them. Paul, seeing the same struggle in the infant churches, responds, in part, with today's text. He responds by numbering 24 positive marks of the congregations. Paul wants to give them a blessing of confidence, not a spirit of fear. And that is what we are aiming at today.

As we consider the instruction to Live in Harmony with One Another, let's look at this through the lens of the Get Smart film clip we just saw. Did you notice the 3 very strong statements in that short interaction?

"I'll be right back"(God's promise)

"Where could you possibly be going" (What happens when God steps away)

AND "Never do that again" (What we learn when God returns, as God always does)

**"I'LL BE RIGHT BACK"**

In this slice of scripture, Paul notes 24 positive qualities of Christian community. I don't think we celebrate those enough. We get lured into fixating on all the times we don't make it. We all too often live in that split second of fear when God says, you can do this, I'll be right back, keep moving forward. And so sometimes we spend a lot of time living in regret, instead of in celebration. In the story of the Gospel and in the larger narrative of our faith, Jesus returns again and again to equip us for something more than that. I'll bet you've often heard the phrase, "Jesus saves." And that is certainly true for me. But I believe with the

same intensity that it is also deeply true that "Jesus Equips." When the disciples can't pray, Jesus teaches the Lord's Prayer and models a methodical practiced life of spirituality. When the disciples get confused about power and rank, he shares parables of God's justice describing equity and acceptance that is not based on social status. When the disciples buckle to the pressures of a fear-filled world of materialistic competition, Jesus points to qualities of living that are eternal and unlimited. Jesus returns throughout the story to model and equip. And Jesus works in us to this day for the same purpose, commissioning us to model Christian community and equip one another.

## WELCOME PROJECT

Now, our response when God says, "I'll be right back" is usually "WHERE COULD YOU POSSIBLY BE GOING!"

In spite of ourselves, we seek to be in charge of God. And because this is an absurd project, we do the next best thing, we worry. Instead of carrying on in the ways we have been taught, we wander about and even invent new ways to follow God. We construct some pretty silly ways to follow God as a kind of spiritual filler.

The journalist A. J. Jacobs makes light fun of this impulse. In his book, "The Year of Living Biblically : One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible", 2007, Simon & Schuster, Jacobs tries to live out the bible literally for one year. It's an absurd project, and he knows it. But in the process we learn the ways in which all of us enter into a strange quasi-religious life when we simply forget the deep meanings of the stories we have shared.

This is important to mention as we try to internalize and understand the scriptural lessons I've called the One Anothers. The One Anothers aren't about the work of filling a vacuum where God should be standing. They aren't a naïve attempt to live like Jesus & his disciples did. We're not trying to find a way to walk everywhere instead of using bicycles or buses or cars. We're not trying to learn how to avoid refrigeration by eating only salted and dried foods. The behaviors we seek to modify are the ones related to our interpersonal relations. We don't seek the appearance of religiosity, we seek the substance of justice and equity, charity and friendship between us.

We have spent a time at the One Anothers. A short time. I have only lightly touched on them. And we have looked at them in a context, the times in which we live. We are situated in a time beset by the fear that if we took all this to heart, if we acted upon the One Anothers, we would be weird. If we lived in a structured and sacred way, that we might veer off into crazy fanaticism. Indeed the American landscape, our very culture, encourages that caution. For the religious life in general competes with parts of life in the American landscape. Despite arguments to the contrary, this is hardly a Christian nation and hardly a faithful nation on many accounts. The American landscape is a challenge that excels in goading us away from any other belief system besides some occasional and changeable false

gods of consumerism. Satisfaction through shopping and immortality through medicine are 2 such false gods that come to mind. There are other false gods that you might recognize and can name as you them pass by each day.

So, it's frankly risky and adventurous business to think we can live in harmony. It's risky business when make a declaration of care for One Another in a congregation. We risk sounding insular and exclusionary. And it's good to approach this with introspection and prayer.

I believe however, that we can find our balance there, in spite of the shrill critiques of a cynical society. A bigger obstacle, perhaps, is the quaintness of the One Anothers. Sure they are tender, but are they believable? And if believable, then how does one negotiate them? How does one lose one's life to gain the kingdom and remain authentic, not merely another cartoon character of religious belief on the landscape? How does one matter, how does one remain authentic and relevant?

I think a part of the answer comes in the form of celebration. Just as Paul sought to sow the seeds of celebration in his only partial list of 24 qualities of church life, we might celebrate what is happening right and where we are connecting. Sometimes the only thing needed to banish darkness is one small light.

At the the recent Multifaith event at the Cubberly Community Center on August 31 I learned something about this. This was an important event for many reasons. It was a community-wide interfaith conversation about ways that we can gather together in support of our kids who daily negotiate some of these same questions of caring and acting in faith. A highlight for me were the thoughtful remarks of Rabbi Janet Marder of Congregation Beth Am, Los Altos Hills. She spoke of Psalm 23 as a psalm we mostly hear at funerals. She thought that was too bad that Psalm 23 had fallen into that box. She reminded us that, although it is clearly a Psalm of comfort, it is also Psalm of life. It is a Psalm that promises God's ever-presence. It is a Psalm that reminds us of feasting in the very midst of strife. It assures and calls on the power of life in the face of death itself. To mourn loss is important human work and it is best done in a community that can also celebrate life with depth and passion. We need to be reminded from time to time that God is around. Especially when the harmony of life is rattled.

Still when we've been convinced of God's return, don't we always want to say to God: "DON'T EVER DO THAT AGAIN!"

As if we can't still believe that God always returns from an absence, a time away. And as if we've forgotten the ways that we *have* made it, while God stood not at all as far away as we thought, and while we walked on our own for a little, trying out the steps that God taught.

A commentator (Kean Salzer) made this kind of counter-intuitive observation, that spiritual maturity requires that we go it alone sometimes. To make his point, he shares a story about how eaglets learn to fly. The adult eagles, the parents do an astounding thing...when it's time to learn to fly, they carry the eaglets up high...and drop them. It is the way, he says, "to move from Nestling, crying for someone to come and feed you, to an Active Flyer."

To learn to live in harmony, to live into the One Anothers, requires that we are Active Flyers. This is the way that that we become, in Slazer's words, "the ones who ride the wind and can feed ourselves and others, preserving the future of eagles."

Bottom Line : Is God Trustworthy?

We have been lofted high by our hopes and needs in faith. That is how God calls to our souls to get the whole thing started. An inner call, an inner longing, an inner need. It's a risky place to be, to say, out loud to yourself, "I'm going to try God. I'm going to honestly engage Jesus. I'll be vulnerable to the Holy Spirit. And then I'll see what happens." We want to know the outcome first. We all start as Nestlings, getting fed, not too much risk. Can we let go and cast ourselves on those 24 promises of safety in the Body of Christ that Paul lists? Or to ask it more bluntly : Is God trustworthy?

Psalm 9 says this, "You Lord have never foresaken those who seek you."

Psalm 18 says, "Everyone who runs toward God, makes it."

The ability to live into the One Anothers is not an ability based upon logic or will-power, it is the ability to lean on the trustworthiness of God. And we can expect to fulfill God's call in our lives to observe the covenant, the promise to live together under these behavioral rules, only by that grace and strength. It is the work of the church, always has been.

"I'll be right back" - This is the promise of God. You are never that far away from God's care. "Where Could You Possibly Be Going!" & "Never Do That Again." Are just about the most dramatic admissions of our need as anything else we could say. We are bonded in Christian community because we are bonded to God. And it is this bond that makes us fit to engage our world in healing ways.

We conclude this examination of the One Anothers with another significant admission. It is one made in some way or another by everyone who is a follower of Jesus. It is our individual understanding of the identity of Jesus Christ. The question comes from the NT : Who do you say that Jesus is? The answer to that is foundational. Does Jesus have credibility to instruct us in the ways we live together in this community and thus in the larger world we inhabit? I invite you to continue to study and pray about the instructions to the church found in the One Anothers. And may the grace of God give us insight and daring so that we might continue to live into the Welcome Project as our way to focus this in our local experience.

As I prepare to share worship next Saturday at our District Quarterly Conference, this topic is very much on my mind. The question in fact I am charged to share is : Who do you say that Jesus is? I want to invite you to help me answer that question. On the plaza during our time of fellowship, I will be standing by with a video camera recording brief answers to that question as you might feel called to share them. They will be an important part of encouraging others at the conference to enter into dialog about the identity of the one who says to us, Love one another. Others will know that you are my disciples if you love one another.