

Radical Love
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The church is commonly referred to as a community called out of “the world” or as a community set apart for a distinct mission in relation to the world. For Paul, the “world” meant Roman society. It was a society that was rigidly divided between people of different social statuses, different occupations, different ethnic backgrounds. To conform to that world meant cutting yourself off from everyone who didn’t fit within your proscribed circle of colleagues, friends and family.

That would have been a life that Paul, as a diasporan Jew, could appreciate. While he would have had contact, perhaps professionally, with Gentiles, he certainly wouldn’t have socialized with them. Some he would have considered superior and others inferior. He would have been reminded in his everyday life where he stood within that social hierarchy. Letting go of that and encouraging others to let it go could be pretty dangerous. Yet let go he did. And he spent his life encouraging others to let go as well, to abandon the social order and be transformed through new relationships. Paul believed that was the heart of the gospel, as he says in his letter to the Galatians: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” I can’t imagine a more radical statement than that.

In this letter to the Romans, unlike the letter to the Galatians, Paul is writing to a community he does not know. He is writing prior to a visit. Yet, this community, this early church, was like others he had visited and those he had started himself. It was not of the world, it was separate from the norms of Roman society. These churches were in homes, they were often led and funded by women, they were mixed congregations of people from all social strata, they were Jews and Gentiles. In fact, Frescos have been discovered showing women in leadership roles in ministry, some presiding over sacred meals such as the eucharist. These faith communities were breaking all the rules of the day and the overarching quality of these communities was the way they loved one another.

In his letter to the Roman church, Paul encourages this radical love, this genuine love and care in a new kind of community where barriers are broken down and where they all are united to follow the path of Jesus. A path which calls for discipleship that is counter culture in nature. The church then and today, offers an invitation to a new community that nurtures believers to live differently and to live out their calling both within the faith community and the wider society.

Paul gets pretty specific about what following Jesus means. Hospitality always has been and should be a hallmark of the Christian faith. As theologian, Eleazar Fernandez writes “Against a culture of conformity and acquiescence, those who live in the power of the crucified Christ embody virtues and practices that promote life-giving relations. They engage in a way of being and acting that seeks to embody genuine love, mutual regard, humility, solidarity, peace and harmony. It is a way of being and acting that cares not only for the members of the faith

community but also for the wide society, particularly strangers in their midst. The Christian tradition has called this practice hospitality.

Fernandez goes on with a challenge to the church that “we must move beyond hospitality as charity to hospitality as an act of justice. Hospitality as charity offers crumbs from our tables, hospitality as justice offers a place at the table.” Hospitality as justice can be a real challenge. It means letting go of power, it means inviting people in and opening ourselves up to really listening to others’ stories of persecution, injustice and marginalization and standing with them in their struggle for justice and equality. Last year we were challenged by Dr. William Barber to confront institutional racism in his book “The Third Reconstruction”. On my Fall reading-list this year is the book “*Between the World and Me*” by Ta-Nahisi Coates. It is a memoir of his coming to terms with institutional racism in the form of a letter to his son. Our willingness to acknowledge institutional racism and to hear the experiences of our Black brothers and sisters and stand with them in their struggle for equality is justice hospitality.

Paul goes further to challenge us to minister to those who persecute us and to not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. In his book “*What’s So Amazing About Grace*” Philip Yancey recounts the story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer who was wrestling with the command to “love your enemies” while being persecuted under Nazi Germany. Even though Bonhoeffer worked to undermine the Nazi regime, he followed Jesus command to “pray for those who persecute you”. Bonhoeffer stated, “God loves his enemies – that is the glory of his love, as every follower of Jesus knows”.

This has been exemplified recently in Charlottesville, VA when Christians joined with Jews and Muslims in a call for action against KKK and Neo Nazi marchers. At night, trapped in a church, they were surrounded by torches, threats and vile taunts. One woman inside said when she looked out the church window it was like “looking into hell.” Yet, the next day they emerged to march arm in arm silently, prayerfully through the streets of Charlottesville.

This show of love does have the power to be transformational. I saw an interview with a couple formally affiliated with these hate groups who have since renounced those beliefs. They said what changed them was not the people throwing bottles and yelling at them but the love they were confronted by from faithful believers.

It’s a challenging call that Paul puts in front of the early church in Rome and to us as well. We are called to be a community set apart. As Fernandez writes, “the early Christian communities wrestled not only with how to stand in contrast to the imperial Roman system of privilege, power and conformity, but also how to live differently as communities defined by the life and teachings of the crucified One.” This is our challenge to wrestle with as well. While Westminster has a proud history of providing justice hospitality and solidarity, there are always new challenges ahead.

How will we stand against a system of power and privilege and share the radical, transformative love and hospitality of justice of Jesus Christ with those around us?

