

Embodying Grace & Peace | How to Be the Church

“Genuine Community” - T.J. Campo

Romans 12.1-8

5.29.22

Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. 2 And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

3 For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith. 4 For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, 5 so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. 6 Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; 7 if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching; 8 or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.

I’m going to start today’s sermon a little differently. I want to at least raise the issue of this week’s tragic happenings at an elementary school in Uvalde, TX. Uvalde, BTW, is the birthplace of Dale Evan (actress). Matthew McConaughey and the third man to walk on the moon, astronaut, Pete Conrad. were born there.

In all the commentary this week, there were calls the government to do something, “do ANYthing” – and I recognize and really do appreciate that cry of desperation. Of course, doing ANYthing may make the doers feel better but if that THING, that ANYthing isn’t an effective measure to help victims and their families and to prevent future incidents then the effort is only self-serving.

Amid the editorials and viewpoints expressed in the last week, I heard someone raise the question, “Is our nation sick?” And in the ensuing discussion the pundits raised the issues that are normally raised – violent video games and movies, the pandemic (worsening things like isolation and loneliness). Gun-ownership was considered as always. According to a research group from Geneva, Switzerland called The Small Arms Survey, the US leads all nations in gun-ownership-per-one-hundred-residents – we have 120 guns per 100 adult residents... the second nation on that list is Yemen with 52 guns per 100 residents.

There was debate on the type of guns (semi-automatic or automatic). Others pointed out, that automobiles can be weaponized and that criminals will get guns if they want to. Some called for NEW gun-laws; others called for better enforcement of present laws. It’s all argued ad-nauseam when we have a new tragedy.

And the sages concluded, “Yes, America IS sick but IF SO, WHY?” The panel eventually zeroed in on the loss of trust in and failure of our institutions. “What institutions?” you ask. Well, the family, government, institutions of learning (schools and colleges), law-enforcement, hospitals/public-health agencies, civic

organizations, media/journalism outlets, the military, places-of-worship and others. Scandals have weakened virtually all of our institutions.

Divorce has withered people's trust in the family. The Watergate Scandal (1972-74) seems to have been a domino that started a chain reaction weakening trust in government. And there've been new dominoes falling so that confidence in and respect for government is pretty low. And all the other institutions I mentioned: each have had scandals and corruption leaving in their wake disappointment, insecurity, suspicion and a general sense of dis-ease.

AND the Church in America has, tragically, not escaped scandal. Televangelists in the late 1980s; the evangelical church gaining political power and then various attempts to use that power as a kind of "political action committee"; Roman Catholic clergy abuse scandals; celebrity pastors in scandals and right up to the present, this week, cover-ups and revelations in the Southern Baptist Church.

And THIS is why I started the sermon THIS way: I can't help government or be of much help to any of the many institutions I've mentioned. I'm in a family and I can do my part to order my family well and do a small part to bolster THAT institution. But I DO have an office, a calling, a vocation to fulfill in an important institution, i.e. the Church. ("A charge to keep I have, a God to glorify" – Charles Wesley) To serve the church, to build, feed, protect the church and then for the church to present itself FIRST to God as one corporate, living sacrifice, holy, different from our culture, not conformed to this world, daily renewed and renewing AND THEN to be used by God as His institution to embody truth and love, grace and peace to our community and beyond – THIS is something I can do...that WE can do.

It won't be a quick-fix or an immediate help to those grieving parents but if we stay at it, we may find that we leave to our children and grandchildren an institution people can trust and a platform for mission, a way to make Jesus Christ substantial to the world. I believe this is a worthy pursuit and I know (because I've read the end of the Story) that we will succeed because we're promised that even the greatest opposition to the Church of Jesus Christ WILL NOT SUCCEED: the gates of Hell will eventually fall (Mat 16) before the Church of the Resurrected King.

I want to ask you to join me... to recommit ourselves as a whole family to the institution of the Church. Today and in this whole series, I hope God will stir us up to see the Church as His agent, God's Embassy, God's Diplomat, His Ambassador sent to the world to make the Good News of Jesus tangible and UN-ignorable to a the not-yet-believing world.

The passage before us tells us how to go about B̄eing the Church and I'll focus the remainder of our time today on the Church as a genuine community.

We face societal resistance to B̄eing the church. We also LIVE in society and some of the resistance is embedded in us and it has to be combatted by this ongoing transformation that takes place by renewing our minds in ongoing renewal.

We live in a fiercely INDIVIDUALISTIC place and time. It's only getting easier to avoid actual contact and relationship with other people. The Roman Christians who originally read this letter knew what it was to depend on other people but more and more we simply don't need other people.

Leslie Newbigin was an English, Presbyterian minister. He and his wife, Helen, were sent from Scotland to India in 1936 where they helped establish churches for some 40 years and then returned to England in 1974. When they arrived in England, they could tell it had changed and IT was now a kind of Post-Christian mission field. They tried to figure out how their beloved homeland was now in NEED of missionaries (and not the sending base it had once been).

Years later, in one of his later and better known books (*The Gospel In a Pluralist Society*), Newbigin wrote, "The deepest root of the contemporary malaise (despair) of Western culture is an individualism which denies the fundamental reality of our human nature as given by God namely that we grow into true humanity only in relationships of faithfulness and responsibility toward one another."

After being in India, a much more communal/familial society, he was able to see how the West was embracing – NOT rugged individualism but RABID individualism. It's taken an enormous toll on our society. It's almost always one factor in the formation of shooters but normally it just leads people into loneliness and "malaise" (despair) as Newbigin wrote.

Today people are not only isolated more than in yesteryear but also anxious and afraid. Again, there are tons of reasons for this – "the 24hr news cycle" (saying ALMOST the same thing over and over) and now we hold the news in our hands and are NEVER away from it and it's so often sensationalized worst-case scenario news. People are on edge and afraid of other people because the news looks like bad-actors are everywhere all-the-time.

In this environment many people fear being pigeonholed or labeled. As people think of coming into the church this is a real problem; the fear that "I won't be able to be myself and people will indoctrinate me and turn me into someone I'm not!"

We're having trouble relating to one another across racial lines. Racial tensions are troubling and the answers are not simple. The Church in America has sometimes been complicit in these tensions. We don't always do well in simply listening to people who are culturally different from ourselves. We could add political tensions, as everything seems to have a political cause and a political solution today. But the gospel SPEAKS to these tensions and fears.

The Apostle Paul, as we saw, took us deep into God's grace and even in simply writing about what Jesus Christ DID for all who believe, as Paul considered, the Father's eternal plan and the Son's stepping OUT of eternity and entering time-and-space to OBEY for me – to do the Law that I have NOT obeyed and to accept the just punishment I deserved...and as Paul wrote about the Holy Spirit of God who hovers over us and brings LIGHT into our darkness and brings us to spiritual LIFE and FAITH – when Paul wrote about that, he eventually burst into JOY and SONG.

Then Paul says, start of this chapter, “Therefore by the mercies of God present your BODIES and YOUR THINKING and YOUR WHOLE SELF to God as a logical response... as what God’s infinitely lovely grace compels you to do – in other words – “Go with it! Live together in real love and true reconciliation and do it because the LOVE of God allures you to do so – GO WITH IT!”

Paul wants us to see that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinful, broken people – NOT so we could get like a spiritual high and be on our way but to form us into a family, a people, a holy city within the city. It’s a tremendous adventure and a thrilling challenge – to actually live, sharing life in an ongoing renewal... a different way of thinking and relating.

The Work of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – has ransomed us for a purpose. If you’ve not come into that purpose – if you’ve NOT recognized the people around you as once strangers and maybe even enemies BUT NOW family WITH WHOM you have been gathered by the Master of Ceremonies to live out the counter-cultural life of grace – if you don’t see that and haven’t really entered in, then either you haven’t yet received grace by faith OR you’re so NEW to the faith and uninformed that you just don’t know.

But I hope, today, your UNKNOWING will be counteracted by grace and truth. To be a Christian and NOT have the church as family and friends and people with whom you share life is like being a fish out of water or better like an organ taken out of the Body – you simply can’t thrive. You miss out on the mission and the cooperation, the commonality, the shared burdens and the united purpose of LIFE! I’ll end with three notes that might affect you personally and us corporately.

First, if you are ever going to be YOU – I mean be the person God made you to BE – it won’t happen without deep relationships. Some people find those deep relationships in family and friends – better to have that than to go it alone...though today, a lot of people are simply going it alone.

But the Body of Christ is more than a family. It’s made up of people who are different. We have the same spiritual DNA but we differ as much as a hand differs from an eye. We look different and we’re wired differently. Without those differences and your interacting with people who are very different from you – you won’t emerge from the cocoon. The church gives you the opportunity to do what even your family couldn’t do for you.

To become complete in Christ (as much as possible on THIS side of eternity) requires you to be set like an organ (like a liver or lungs or a foot) to be transplanted into a Body... it simply can’t happen on a private spiritual journey.

You may say, “Yeah... but I’m an introvert.” That’s ok – you don’t have to be me and I don’t have to be you. We can be VERY different but we MUST know we belong to one another. Look at vv. 4-5 “For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.”

Second, we as a church must see that we exist for the world. Our city, our neighborhood, our nation, the world NEEDS to see us. We are making Jesus Christ visible and tangible to a world that needs to see Him.

We show the world – “This is what it might look like for YOU to believe in Jesus... we don’t all look the same...we are diverse ages, genders, clothing, tastes in food and music, skin colors, political affiliations, income levels, educational levels... and we hope and pray and reach out to you HOPING THAT GOD’S GRACE will ring true and you’ll GO WITH IT and get fitted like an organ into the Body.”

To BE the Church for the world we have to genuinely believe... and the grace we receive as we do will be expressed to one another in real love – not just theoretical love or niceness but real involvement in one another’s lives.

To those many of you who are believers in Jesus, I hope we will see the great adventure it is to be a believer and a MEMBER (an appendage, a limb, an organ, a hand, an ear) and relish the opportunity to become the real NEW you as the Church becomes more complete for a world that needs to see Jesus Christ among us.

If you're NOT yet a believer... or too young in the faith to see your place in the church, we’re waiting to live life with you...so come on... don’t waste anymore time than you have to!

The deepest root of the contemporary malaise of Western culture is an individualism which denies the fundamental reality of our human nature as given by God - namely that we grow into true humanity only in relationships of faithfulness and responsibility toward one another. The local congregation is called to be, and by the grace of God often is, such a community of mutual responsibility.

Almost everything in the “plausibility structure” which is the habitation of our society seems to contradict this Christian hope. Everything suggests that it is absurd to believe that the true authority over all things is represented in a crucified man. No amount of brilliant argument can make it sound reasonable to the inhabitants of the reigning plausibility structure. That is why I am suggesting that the only possible hermeneutic (explanation) of the gospel is a congregation which believes it.

But this will only happen as and when local congregations renounce an introverted concern for their own life, and recognize that they exist for the sake of those who are not members, as sign, instrument, and foretaste of God’s redeeming grace for the whole life of society.

- Leslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (1989; pp. 231-233; emphasis added)