

Romans 12:9-21
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Watch for Traffic, Hold Hands, and Stick Together¹

Toward the end of my high school career, Robert Fulghum's brief reflection entitled, "All I ever needed to know, I learned in Kindergarten," was all the rage. I had a poster of it on my dorm room wall at Davidson. Someone even made it into a song. Here's an excerpt:

Most of what I really need to know about how to live, and what to do, and how to be, I learned in kindergarten. Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate school mountain, but there in the sand box at nursery school. These are the things I learned. Share everything. Play fair. Don't hit people. Put things back where you found them. Clean up your own mess. Don't take things that aren't yours. Say you are sorry when you hurt somebody. Wash your hands before you eat. Flush. Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you. Live a balanced life. Learn some and think some and draw some and paint and sing and dance and play and work everyday. Take a nap every afternoon. When you go out in the world, watch for traffic, hold hands, and stick together.²

As we catch up with the Apostle Paul in the 12th chapter of Romans, he has spent eleven chapters passionately appealing to his audience's reason and intellect, as well as their hearts. He has been carefully laying out his finely tuned argument to the Roman church about God's saving work in Jesus. There are divisions within the church it seems, perhaps between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians about who is more faithful, about who has a better "in" with God. Paul has used a lot of ink and energy to explain that "all have sinned and fall short of the

¹ Robert Fulghum, <https://efffocus.files.wordpress.com/2017/08/all-i-ever-learned-in-kindergarten.pdf>

² Fulghum

glory of God,” that all people regardless of background or pedigree stand in need of God’s mercy.³ Paul ends chapter 11 praising God for this mercy. He begins this chapter calling the church not to be conformed to the culture around them and to be transformed by “the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.”⁴ In other words, the church is called to embrace a thinking faith, a faith that questions and is humble and curious. The church therefore is expected not simply to go back to school, but to be in school always, to be forever-students of what it means to be God’s people in and for God’s beloved world.

In our text for this morning, Paul spells it out a bit more explicitly. He gives us a list, a syllabus even. And it is beautiful—beautiful enough to be a favorite text for weddings. And it is hard, making those of us gathered around a table for bible study grimace a bit as we read the text together, recognizing how much we still have to learn. [Read Romans 12:9-21]

School has been in session for a few weeks, and yet, with the arrival of September, college football, and Labor Day weekend, it feels more real now. It’s been twenty-seven years or so since I had a course schedule and books to buy for myself (MUCH longer since I started kindergarten), but something about this season makes me want to break out a new notebook and sharpen new pencils, and sit at a desk and take notes listening to a wise teacher or professor. I have no delusions about going back to school; taking tests and writing papers is hard work. That said, as I read over Paul’s words in Romans this week, I did have a sense that I had

³ Romans 3:23, New Revised Standard Version, updated edition (NRSVue)

⁴ Romans 12:2, NRSVue

been enrolled in a refresher course of sorts, a class in remembering who and what the church is called to be and be about.

“Let love be genuine,” our text reads. Another translation calls us to, “Love from the center of who you are.”⁵ The Greek word comes from the same root as hypocrisy. Hypocrite was the word used to describe actors in the ancient world. They wore masks on stage, making them quite literally two-faced. The love Paul calls the church to offer is the love we have received in Jesus Christ. This love wears no mask. It comes to us openly and genuinely as a free gift, not because of anything we have done but because of who God is and what God has done in Jesus. That is the center of who we are. Everything else ripples out from there.

In fact, scholar Mary Hinkle Shore sees Paul’s entire list as concentric circles rippling out from the center.⁶ The first section speaks to the immediate community, the members of the local church. The second circle includes “the saints”—perhaps in the church in Jerusalem—and those needing hospitality. The third circle encompasses enemies. Yes, enemies. Paul holds no kumbaya, rose-colored vision of the world. He honestly acknowledges that God’s beloved children inside and outside the church have enemies, and that we are called to feed them and give them cold water to drink, attending to their most basic needs. Full stop. Period. Then the final circle expands to include all people: “If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”⁷ I have always appreciated this particular verse, because it honestly acknowledges that there are limits to what we are able to control. I cannot dictate how another

⁵ Romans 12:9, The Message

⁶ Shore, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-22/commentary-on-romans-129-21-2>

⁷ Romans 12:18, NRSVue

treats me. I can—in my better moments, by the grace of God and the persistent work of the Holy Spirit—have some control over how I act toward others. This extends beyond just me, however. Paul uses the plural form of *you* throughout this text—y’all or more precisely all y’all. *So far as it depends on all y’all live in peace with all*, OR more pointedly—*So far as it depends on all y’all, keep on making peace with all*. This is not simply an encouragement to leave well enough alone. Instead, it is a call to be actively working for peace—wholeness, rest, *shalom*—not only with those in the church but with everyone. The notion of peace that Paul invokes here quite literally stems from a notion of tying or joining together. Or, in Fulghum’s words: “When you go out in the world, watch for traffic, hold hands, and stick together.”

Paul is not presenting the church with a checklist per se. This is not something for me to try and accomplish on my own by next Sunday, which is great good news because that’s impossible. I cannot do this alone. I cannot be Christian on my own. No one can. And blessedly no one expects us to. As Dr. Shore notes, it is almost as if Paul is advising those in the church: “Don’t try this alone.”⁸ We do not gin up love and grace all on our own. We are not self-made, nor are we self-saved. Christ is the center of who we are. He claims us in the waters of baptism, and he feeds us over and over again at this table, nourishing us not simply with warm cookies and milk but with the bread of life and the cup of salvation. He saves us. He puts us back together time and time again, and he longs for us to be about doing his holy work of building bridges, feeding enemies, and welcoming strangers. He wants us to stick together, to hold hands, not just with one another but with those who vote, love, and live differently from us.

⁸ Shore

In the midst of all that Paul hears God calling us to do and embrace, there is one significant thing that God takes off our plates—vengeance. I saw a billboard as we drove home from the beach last week. It quoted only one part of this verse: “Vengeance is mine, says the Lord,” leading me to believe that the creator of the billboard had some specific people in mind who should heed that warning. I get it. It is so easy, so very tempting, and so very time and energy consuming for me to fixate on who precisely I think God should exact that vengeance on. In a week when students, faculty, and staff at UNC and TCU and too many other communities have been traumatized by senseless, preventable violent acts, I grit my teeth and make my list as my heart races and my rage boils. This is bigger than playing nice in a sandbox. We are not called to be neutral. Paul insists that the church is called to hate what is evil (not *who*, by the way, but *what*). We are called actively to reject and work to dismantle all that hurts and terrorizes any and all children of God. And yet, if I allow my days to be fixated on payback, if I find my center in revenge, there is very little room for anything else. Our center, our identity is found in nothing and no one other than Jesus Christ. The God we know in Jesus Christ is still shaping Christ’s church to be consumed with love, to be fixated on grace, and to fill her days working to make peace.

My kindergarten teachers tried very hard to teach me all the things Fulghum names. I confess however that I have not mastered them yet; I still have a lot to learn. So, I stick with the church and thanks be to God, the church sticks with me. Because I know beyond a doubt that I cannot do this alone, and thanks be to God, I don’t have to. I head out into God’s beloved embattled world not on my own, but with you, with the church. And together by the grace of God, we will “watch for traffic, hold hands, and stick together” following Jesus Christ, our Savior,

our Lord, and our friend who promises to hold our hands and stick with us no matter what, no matter where.

Thanks be to God. Amen.