

Living in the Embrace of God's Love
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Romans 12: 1-5
November 22, 2015

Loving Giving God, help us we pray to recognize the difference between satisfaction and smugness, being content and being comfortable. May our expressions of gratitude never deafen us to the cries of those in need; and in celebrating your love may we never forget that your love reaches others through our hands and our hearts, Amen.

Have you ever tried to describe to a friend or colleague what our church is like? What defines us as community of faith? What makes it different? Why it matters? It's important to describe it carefully to help overcome preconceived notions. Tragically, there is a lot of bad press out there with Christ's name all over it!

Recent studies have shown that the most common answers are not good when young people are asked, "What does it mean to be a Christian?" *Narrow minded and judgmental are at the top of the list, followed by Christians hate gay people.* Tragically, that is how much of young America sees us!

This is not the church I know, because that is not the God we worship. *Narrow minded, judgmental, hate-filled...*

It was certainly not the church that Paul was calling us to be when he said to the followers in Rome, "Friends, present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect." **I love this passage.**

It brings into bold relief what Jesus was hoping for when he wandered down to the shoreline hoping to find a faithful people to follow him on a mission to change the world. He found them and they did it. Their followers continued the legacy of living a life of gratitude by serving others with love, compassion and open minds and hearts. They became Rays of Light in the Gathered Gloom!

Rodney Stark, a noted sociologist who wrote *The Rise of Christianity*, describes the dramatic contrast in culture between the pagan community and the early Christian church when the great epidemic, called the Plague of Galen, struck the Roman Empire in the second century. During this horrific plague, there were estimates that one quarter to one half of the population died. Caravans of carts and wagons hauled the dead from Rome. Homes and pagan temples were found filled with those who had succumbed to the disease. It was a horrific time in history.

Obviously, any rational person wouldn't want to stay around that place for very long. In fact, the famous classical physician, Galen, survived precisely because he escaped quickly out of Rome, and stayed away until the danger receded. This was not abnormal for the times, people fled from the sick.

What was abnormal was the response of the Christian community. Through the gloom they brought the radiance of their courage and their compassion. They stayed and cared for the sick and dying, whether Christian or pagan it did not matter. Honestly, many of these faithful care-givers lost their lives by doing so. They boldly served without personal concern. They acted out of love and with willing sacrifice and in so doing this community of followers gained a sense of purpose and meaning and even joy that came with sacrificial care-filled, selfless living.

A Christian bishop at the time wrote, “Most of our brother (and sister) Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took care of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely joy-filled.”

A century later, Julian, a Roman emperor who loathed the Christians, wrote that he suspected that their benevolence had ulterior motives. Why would people care for people they did not know? Why wouldn't they just take care of themselves? There must be an explanation! And it must be bad, or not of this world!

Such suspicion lives on. It always does when we act as nonconformists in the world transforming what is hopeless and cold into the warmth of God's light.

Four years ago, the Northeast was struck by a devastating snowstorm in late October that brought trees down by the countless thousands. Leaves were still on the trees and so the wet heavy snow dragged down the limbs, and in many cases, the huge trunks of centuries old oaks and maples. The forests sounded like rapid-fire gunshots as trees exploded under the strain. Millions were plunged into darkness. Every town in the state lost power. My town was the very last to get back onto the grid, over 12 days later. Needless to say it got a little cold around those parts!

The people became embittered and enraged at their plight. Many turned their anger on the very people doing their best to help. Town officials were screamed at; power company trucks were pelted by rocks. Line workers, who risked their lives day and night, many from states 500 miles away, were cursed by the good people of our community, because they were not working quickly enough or to the liking of the homeowners in the freezing temperatures. According to executives at the electric power company our community had the worst customer attitudes of the entire state.

However, there were two shining examples of citizens who were set apart from the rest, a husband and wife team, Steve and Tina from First Congregational Church Simsbury Ct., took it upon themselves to bring dozens of hot meals to town employees who were tirelessly clearing the streets, and to line workers who worked day and night. These members of our church brought care and relief like two rays of light in the gathered gloom.

One town official said he had never seen such care and support in over 47 years of community service. He was utterly shocked! I was told that a fellow employee offered the only logical explanation that made any sense to him for their generosity and willing sacrifice. He told his co-workers that he believed this benevolent couple, our beloved church members, with their hot meals and warm hearts, must have been fulfilling a court-ordered sentence for community service!

True story!

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the will of God... present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God!”

Friends, we are in the season of Thanksgiving and yet I dare say that our mood is anything but festive. These are dark and troubling times in our history! A storm of hatred and fear is raging giving rise to wanton violence and desires for revenge. Humanity is losing its way. No one feels safe from this modern day plague of hatred and violence and counter-measure that bring sweeping pain. Calls for walls along the Mexican border are now being replaced by demands to register all Muslims!

Are we that blinded by our fear and rage? Have we forgotten the words that we have held dear as a nation? *Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!*

On Thursday a downtrodden and disheartened Pope Francis said at Holy Mass, “Christmas is approaching: there will be lights, parties, Christmas trees and nativity scenes . . . it’s all a charade. The world continues to go to war. The world has not chosen a peaceful path. We should ask for the grace to weep for this world, which does not recognize the path to peace. To weep for those who live for war and have the cynicism to deny it.” Then the Argentine pontiff added: “God weeps, Jesus weeps”.

There is hope my friends. There is another way.

Listen again to Paul’s words, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

When we live in the embrace of God’s love and invite others to experience God’s beautiful Grace we are living out the words of Paul. When we reach out to the cold and huddled masses and bring relief to the poor, and hope to the downtrodden we are bringing to light and life to the power of his words. When we act as grateful followers of Christ and offer our light, our very lives, for the benefit of others while keeping our hearts and minds open . . . we are doing God’s work!

And in my 31 years of experience as a pastor, I have never witnessed a church that is more intentional, more able, and more faithful in its desire to live out these challenging words of Paul! There are so many ways that you sacrifice on the behalf of others and in the name of our loving God. It is truly inspiring to me and I am deeply humbled to be one of your pastors.

Thank you!

But, this is no time to be timid:

- Let us continue to be bold in our expression of what it means to be Christian.
 - Let us step out and into community together, knowing that we are called to bring into this broken world the light that cannot be extinguished and will be the source of all Hope. The light of love.
 - Let your light shine.
 - Be the ray that breaks the gathered gloom where ever you go!
- Happy Thanksgiving everyone!

Romans 12: 1-5

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.