

“The Ethics of Harmony”***Romans 12.9-21******The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 28 August 2005***

Seldom do people in progressive mainline churches hear a minister preach on morality and ethics, and that’s a problem, because it creates a vacuum that tends to be filled (at least in the public arena) by the views of fundamentalists.

But today you get to hear about Christian morality thanks to our old friend, Paul of Tarsus. The brief passage from his letter to the congregation in Rome is quite beautiful in its reinforcement of the command to love, and pretty demanding in its challenge to turn the tables of anyone who does violence or evil.

I also really like this because it is a strong, positive statement of the fundamental ethos of Christianity. It doesn’t have a lot of negative “Thou shalt not...” clauses, but rather starts out boldly, plainly, simply: “Let love be genuine.” It’s more instructive and more effective to be positive.

Here’s what I mean: I could read the first commandment: “You shall not make for yourself an idol.” That’s pretty specific; it says I can’t take some clay or stone or balled-up aluminum foil and build a model of an animal or other creature and then worship it. But we have to do some pretty good extrapolating if we’re going to say that if we spend all our time being vigilant about our stock portfolio and letting it control us that this, too, is a form of idolatry.

Instead, Paul says, “Do not lack in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.” In other words, be faithful. This is a commandment that has a far greater reach than grabbing a bunch of my son’s Lego blocks and building a calf to worship. It means that in what I do, I’m supposed to serve God. So, no calf. No obsession with my stocks. Instead, I’m meant to spend my energy on loving and in serving God.

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Loving isn’t always easy. Think for a moment about a relationship you’ve been in; it could be with your spouse or partner; it could be with a friend; it could be with a brother or sister. Picture that person in your mind. You’ve shared wonderful times, and you’ve also had some challenging moments. Think of a time when you found loving that person to be a nearly impossible task. The question is, can you still love them even in those moments when they seem pretty unlovable? More often than not, your ability to love them speaks a lot more about you than it does about the other person.

We’re called to live in harmony with one another. And it’s that kind of love – tough love, angry love, conflicted love – that tests our mettle. And it’s at that point – when we need some extra strength – that we need to lean into our faith even harder. Love doesn’t just happen; it takes work. Harmony doesn’t just happen; it takes work.

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“Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.” That sounds pretty easy. Throw a few bucks in the offering plate on Sunday morning and say hi to someone at coffee hour that you haven’t met yet. It may be that easy, but if we’re really going to grow, it will take more.

The ministry of hospitality to strangers is deep, as I mentioned in a sermon about welcoming the aliens a few weeks back. It can be costly to us. For some of our members, it means interviewing people for the Homelessness Prevention Program. For others of us, it means working for a just society in which all are welcomed not just into the full life of the church, but into the fullness of civil rights, regardless of our skin color, ethnicity, gender,

sexual orientation, or country of origin. Extending hospitality is at the very heart of our Open and Affirming stance.

Contributing to the needs of the saints is something we do with our annual pledges and weekly offerings. We not only support the ministry and mission of Plymouth, but of the regional, national, and global settings of the United Church of Christ. We need to be mindful that we have so much, and almost all others living on God's planet have comparatively little. When you think of contributing to the needs of the saints in that way, it puts it in a much broader perspective. As a nation, we're fabulously wealthy, but we are not fabulously generous. If we were a "Christian nation," wouldn't we be doing more to share our wealth with the world? If we were acting as Christian individuals, wouldn't we be giving **at least** 10 percent of our wealth to alleviate hunger, disease, and ignorance among our sisters and brothers? Generosity is one of the key Christian virtues, though it isn't stressed nearly enough.



Believe it or not, what I've described is the easy part: We are to love, to be faithful, and to be generous. Now is when it gets really demanding. As I read you this list of four commandments from Paul, I'd first like to invite you to think about our nation after 9/11 and how it might look different today if we had acted as a "Christian nation."

1. Bless those who persecute you.
2. Do not repay evil for evil.
3. Never avenge yourselves.
4. Feed your enemies and give them something to drink.

Now, you can make a case that it's naïve to use Christian values to chart international relations. Do you think Al Qaeda would be stronger or weaker today if we had done what Paul asks of us? He doesn't say "avoid preventing further catastrophe." Anthony de Mello, a wise Jesuit, told a story about a religious Master and a rattle snake. The Master told the snake that it was immoral to bite any human who walked near him, but the snake objected, saying that it was his nature to bite. So, the snake tried out the Master's ethic. The next week, the Master found the snake with broken bones from being stepped upon. "I did as you told me," said the snake. But the Master said, "I didn't tell you not to hiss and rattle."

Let me list those four moral statements again:

1. Bless those who persecute you.
2. Do not repay evil for evil.
3. Never avenge yourselves.
4. Feed your enemies and give them something to drink.

Now, think about this in personal terms. How do you engage in your personal relationships with those who do wrong to you? That's pretty hard if you are six and your thirteen-year-old brother is harassing you. It's hard when a coworker abuses your trust and gets the next promotion.

I don't think the Christian life is principally about morality, but I do think it is about living the ethos of love that Jesus commanded: love God fully with heart, mind, and strength and love neighbor as self.



As I said at the outset of this meditation, if we don't talk about morals, ethics, values, and virtues, it leaves a vacuum that is often filled by fundamentalists.

If you don't believe me, listen to these words that were spoken last week:

"I don't know about this doctrine of assassination, but if he thinks we're trying to assassinate him, I think we really ought to go ahead and do it. It's a whole lot cheaper than

starting a war, and I don't think any oil shipments will stop. But this man is a terrific danger, and this is in our sphere of influence, so we can't let this happen. We have the Monroe Doctrine, and we have other doctrines that we have announced, and without question, this is a dangerous enemy to our south, controlling a huge pool of oil that could hurt us very badly. We have the ability to take him out, and I think the time has come that we exercise that ability. We don't need another 200-billion-dollar war to get rid of one strong-arm dictator. It's a whole lot easier to have some of the covert operatives do the job and then get it over with.”

Pat Robertson does have a unique way with words, doesn't he? The moral, ethical, and intellectual bankruptcy of fundamentalism is clear to me. And somebody has to step in to fill the void.

All Christian ethics and Christian morality must center around the dominant characteristic of God and the central message of Jesus' preaching: compassion. Let it be so.

Amen.