

*The Bigger Picture*  
September 3, 2017  
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Romans 12:9-21:

*Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.*

*Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' No, 'if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

Matthew 16:21-28:

*From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."*

*Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? "For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."*

At the prayer gathering at Kol Shofar last week, Rev. Veronica Goines of St. Andrew in Marin City spoke, and she asked any St. Andrew folk to come up to the front with her to lead in singing "This Little Light of Mine." Being that I was a member there for 13 years, I felt called to join. The crowd started singing with us, and the clapping

went like this: (clapping on the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> beats). I looked at my friend, Laretta, and could tell that, like, me, she wasn't sure what to do.

Had I not been in the choir at St. Andrew, led by an African American music director, I would not have known that the clapping in the African American tradition is on the 2 and 4, or the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> beats. We were singing the song, in the congregation of about 300 people, and the clapping was wrong. It may sound insignificant, but it wasn't, to me.

I began clapping on the 2 and 4, appearing perhaps as if I was the one out of count. In a crowd clapping on the 1 and 3, I was clapping on the 2 and 4. After the first verse, Veronica gave a pause for us to know the lines of the next verse ("Everywhere I go...") and I think I maybe raised my hands, or made a big bold statement of a clap, to demonstrate with Laretta the proper clapping beat on the 2 and 4 and the crowd joined in. The song was right. We kept singing for a few more verses, and the song took off.

In the scheme of things, it wasn't a big deal, I could have just kept clapping with the crowd. I probably would have forgotten it and all would be fine. But we were at an interfaith prayer gathering where people from different races and different faiths – Jewish, Muslim, Christian – were sharing their hopes of coming together after the divisions at Charlottesville. It felt like my very tiny way of advocating for the black community. Clapping on the 2 and 4.

It was a small risk. But somehow it felt like an answer to the call in the Romans passage to Let love be genuine, hold fast to what is good; not to lag in zeal, and to be ardent in spirit. We all came together that evening to, as Romans continues: Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering (the suffering of the continual violence over divisions in our country), and to persevere in prayer.

I wish standing up for the victims of the flood from Hurricane Harvey in Houston and for victims of the many fires in the West Coast were as simple and easy as clapping on the 2 and 4. As we sit in relative comfort in Marin County, and look out onto hazy skies, reminding us that somewhere there are people fleeing their homes from fire, and hear and see through the media the devastation in Houston, it is overwhelming. We can, however, in our own small ways, make a difference.

For those of us from afar, there are many ways to offer help the people in Houston. The Presbyterian Disaster Assistance is putting together "Gift of the Heart" hygiene kits with toothbrushes and towels, and cleanup buckets and we can donate to this fund. For those able to help in person, the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance has a Call Center where people can be notified of volunteer opportunities.

Members of the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance National Response Team are on the ground this weekend to help with the assessment and planning for long-term recovery. "We have a number of congregations that are actively trying to help

members and neighbors rip out carpet and sheetrock because the quicker we get to that, the less likely we have mold.”

Some communities are still without power and there have been several natural gas leaks. There are 18 Presbyterian congregations with water damage. Some 30,000 families have lost their homes. Our “One Great Hour of Sharing” offering raises designated funds for responding to specific disasters such as Hurricane Harvey.

As we as individuals and groups respond to God’s call, we become part of a movement of grace, healing, love and sacrifice that has the power to really change things for the better. As we give ourselves in small practical acts of love for one another and for those who are hurting, marginalized and different from us, we help to bring equality, connectedness and peace to our world.

There was a poem I came upon this week entitled “Stubborn Ounces” by Bonaro Overstreet, and it goes like this:

(To One Who Doubts the Worth of Doing Anything if You Can’t Do Everything):  
You say the Little efforts that I make  
Will do no good: they never will prevail  
To tip the hovering scale  
Where Justice hangs in balance.

I don’t think I ever thought they would.  
But I am prejudiced beyond debate  
In favor of my right to choose which side  
Shall feel the stubborn ounces of my weight.

Last week, after Peter proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, Jesus told the disciples at Caesarea Phillipi that he would build his church upon this rock. We discussed how it is possible the rock he meant was the rock of Caesarea Phillipi, which was the place of pagan worship, the Las Vegas of the day, the place of debauchery and worship of the desolate god of the underworld where Jews were discouraged or forbidden to go. This week, Jesus tells the disciples the details of this building project. That he must go to Jerusalem, be subjected to great suffering, and be killed. He is going once again into the danger zone.

Peter hears and envisions the suffering, the death, and he cries out, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you!” Just the way most of us would likely respond. We don’t want to learn of the destruction ahead, of the pain, the chemo, the flooding, the drowning, the terrorism, the racism, the violence, the abuse, the divorce, the layoffs.

We want a God who will stop all that. We want a God who will prevent all the suffering. Peter wanted a Messiah who would overtake the Roman Empire and halt

the oppression and abuse of the people and liberate the Israelites, not a Messiah who would seem to succumb to it --who would walk straight into the fire and be tortured and killed.

Jesus is demonstrating a different type of Messiah than expected; a Savior who doesn't save by returning force and violence with force and violence to show who's in charge, but the opposite. Jesus chooses to challenge the evil powers with a different logic. He offers a different option to the worldly ways of gaining freedom. This is the way of forgiveness, of mercy, of love; of compassion and of hope; of service to others, even in the face of death. "Forgive them, Father, they know not what they do." "Today, you will be with me in Paradise." "Mother, this is your Son."

This is why Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the Savior, for me. He is able to stay true and faithful to God even in complete distress and despair. He shows us what that looks like. It is a willingness to be vulnerable, in the most profound sense, in order to liberate others. And he calls us to follow. What Jesus means in "taking up one's cross," is this willingness to be vulnerable, to be open to being used by God for the sake of others. To surrender our pride, ego, status, and comfort so that God's will, not our will, is done. From suffering and pain comes healing.

This is the part that the disciples, particularly Peter, miss in Jesus' pronouncement. The tiny little phrase, a few small words that give the bigger picture. The words Peter neglects to comprehend and that we, in our day to day lives, often fail to comprehend. Jesus shows his disciples that he will undergo suffering and be killed and *on the third day be raised to life*.

This is the divine thing that is overlooked because of Peter's focus on the human things. It is the focus on the pain and suffering and human things of fear that preclude Peter and us from recognizing and embracing and trusting the divine things of love that come out of the pain and suffering.

The Romans passage calls God's people to live in love for one another & for enemies, giving themselves for the well-being of others in practical ways. It is in this self-giving love, when we let go of our self-centered ambitions, that we find our 'souls' (our true, God-given selves) and we discover true, abundant life. This is how losing our life gives us life. Losing our self-centered lives, and opening ourselves to others brings true and meaningful life.

This is why Jesus castigates Peter for focusing on human things – the focus on saving ourselves for our own sakes, versus giving of ourselves for the good of all. This goes against our self-preserving instincts, but it is true.

Furniture-store owner, Jim McIngvale, known as "Mattress Mack," turned his 2 Gallery Furniture stores into shelters for 800 Houstonians displaced by Hurricane Harvey. Volunteers drove furniture trucks to pick up the displaced people and bring them to the store, where they had a safe, dry, comfortable place to stay. And with a

restaurant on the premises, Jim provided breakfast, lunch and dinner for the 800 evacuees. McIngvale says, "I was raised a Catholic, and I continued my Catholic faith throughout my life, trying to do the right thing and hopefully help people along the way."

Talk about an honorable worker for Labor Day! Tomorrow is dedicated to the social and economic achievements of American workers. Labor Day is a national acknowledgment and celebration of the contributions workers have made to the strength, prosperity, and well-being of our country. I would say Mattress Mack fits the bill.

Last week Jesus asked, "Who do you say that I am?" This week, perhaps the question is, "Who do you say that *you* are?" How far are you willing to go? Are you willing to let go of fear of losing your own ego, status, pride and comfort, in other words, are you willing to lose your life, to serve others? Are you willing to trust in God's promise of provision and new life? Believing that our true worth is found in giving ourselves on behalf of others?

Last week we wrote down our God-given gifts and how we would use them this week, and placed them in the offering plates. It was a great honor for me to tenderly read these offerings. Here are the God-given gifts that were shared, the many gifts among us:

kindness, compassion, love, intelligence,  
courage to share my vulnerability, goodwill and a desire to help,  
faith that things will work out, nurturing, ability to fix things, caring for others,  
patience, to see the best in others, sense of humor, freedom to pursue my dreams.

These are the gifts among us that God has given. The way they are used and shared with others in the world is each person's gift to God. It is a treasure trove in this sanctuary.

In the bigger picture, go ahead and clap when you want to clap, shine where you can shine, and always, always keep in mind the hopeful and healing message that God's love overcomes all, even death. Through the way of Christ, we, too, are raised to new life.

Thanks be to God.