

Did any of you catch the commencement speech given by Harrison Butker, the place kicker for the Kansas City Chiefs, for Benedictine College, a Catholic school in Kansas, a few weeks ago? It's been quite controversial, especially what he said about women, like his wife, may find more fulfillment in marriage and having children than in having a career and slamming our LGBTQ+ siblings in Christ. That didn't make several of us happy. I listened to his speech because before I reacted I wanted to know what was said, and I was intrigued. What intrigued me most though wasn't his suggestion that women go back to the 1950's or even his slam on upcoming Pride month. It was how his entire speech was about what it means to be a good Catholic, which can also translate to being a good Christian. What I really heard him say was most important to him was knowing that he and his wife and kids would be going to heaven. He didn't mention to those college grads what it looks like to love God by loving your neighbor or by serving others, in particular, the least of these. We live in such a "have it my way", individualistic "everyone's out for themselves" culture. We forget that "in response to Pentecost the early Jesus community did not immediately create creeds, doctrinal statements, or theological litmus tests. They shared their resources, and cared for one another's needs" (Josh A Scott). This individualistic view of faith is a challenge on many levels, but I'll choose two upon which to elaborate: 1. This kind of thinking represents what is antithetical of Christian community: 1. an individualistic faith that leaves out the transforming power of God in community, and 2. Leaving God out of doing the transforming so much so that it's up to each of us to earn our salvation and way to heaven. As I

listened to his speech, I thought of this quote: “Before religion made it all about what we believe, Jesus was all about how we love” (Susan Cottrell). So let’s turn to Paul’s letter to the 1st century church in Rome. Here Paul gives the true marks or character of a Christian. We’re going to read the first two verses of chapter 12 because it serves as the foundation upon which verses 9-16 are built. I don’t do sermon titles, but if I did, I would choose one of these three for today’s sermon. “Transformed living for transformed people,” “Love is a Verb,” or “Picture of a Christ-centered, grace-saturated Community.” Before turning to God’s word, let us first pray. **PRAY. READ.**

I almost didn’t preach on this text today because it is about twenty sermons in one. And...to be honest...I think many of us zone out when we’re given lists or some of us when we hear the preacher say she’s going to read from Romans, which is known to be such a dense, theological letter with lots of doctrine, especially regarding salvation. But tucked away and towards the end of this letter, all of that fades into the background as love takes center stage. Because for Paul, the Christian life is all about faith looking through the lens of love. “To love someone is not to simply to cater to specific likes and dislikes of that person. It is to act toward them in ways that help them experience more of God’s goodness” (Mark Reasoner, WP). I don’t know about y’all, but I need reminders of what a Christ-centered, grace-saturated Community looks like. Paul tells the people in Rome’s church and us that we are going to be conformed, not to what the worlds thinks is “good and acceptable and perfect,” but what God thinks. “Christian lives are spent as living sacrifices, not on the altar of self, but on the altar of the mercies

of God. We need this reminder daily, as we live in a relentlessly self-centered culture. The challenge for us is to find the right harmony between the talk and the walk” (Fleming Rutledge, *Not Ashamed of the Gospel*). This all takes transformation; a makeover, if you will. Not self-improvement. We are not charged to have a better character “as though it were up to us to create one; rather, it is declared to us as good news that the character of the living Lord Jesus is being formed in the Christian community. It is his character that shapes that of his people. When we make the selfless choice instead of the selfish one, it is not a reflection of our own goodness. No, the motive power to live sacrificially derives from the Cross of the Savior who gave himself for us all” (Rutledge).

I must admit that as much as I love most any genre of music, I really struggle with some contemporary Christian music. What I struggle most with is the “I, I, I,” or the “me, me, me.” All of the emphasis in some of these songs seems to be on the “I” rather than on God. This is not at all what Scriptures tell us. “It is the purpose of God that is primary, not what we have made up our minds to do. Saints are made in spite of themselves, by the action of the Holy Spirit. Because who is doing all of this? God. We don’t walk in newness of life because we ‘mean to,’ or intend to. We are not raised from the dead because we mean to be, or intend to be. We are not embraced by God’s glory because we mean to be or intend to be. We are raised from death into the eternal life of God because God means it, God intends it, God does it. God is the chief actor, and what God begins, God brings to completion. The message of Romans

is about the power of God to bring God's purposes to pass in spite of the obstacles we put in God's way" (Rutledge).

Life shaped in the way Paul describes it is spiritual worship- it's a grateful response to the God who has delivered us from our slavery to sin. This worship "requires choosing to be transformed in mind by God's Spirit rather than conformity to what everyone else does or thinks" (*The Discipleship Study Bible*, p. 1939). When our minds are renewed, it makes possible the discerning and doing of God's intentions for human life. This little word "discern," which means to "distinguish between things" makes me think of how much we need community to sift through today's confusing and mixed messages and travel toward the truth. We can't always discern on our own. As Christians we're called to live counter culturally- "ready to challenge those parts of the present age that shout or whisper seductively, that it would be easier and better to do things that way- while the age to come, already begun in Jesus, insists that belonging to the new creation means that we must live this way instead" (Wright). For Paul there is always a relationship between grace and concrete action. Because of God's mercy, we offer ourselves in worship, which means with unpretentious love. Paul lists love first among the thirteen desired behaviors of those following Jesus, and love is more than first among equals. Love sets the tone, and the other dozen very specific desired behaviors grow out of love. Loving genuinely is the antidote to not conforming to this world. When we love genuinely, everything else flows from that love for love is from God and we love because God first loved us (1 John 4:19).

“Paul also says, ‘hate what is evil,’ yes, (though it is more like be repulsed by evil) but further on in chapter 12 we find these words, ‘Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord, I will repay.’ And again, ‘Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.’ That doesn’t mean that you get to determine what or who is evil. There are way too many sound bites out there “with rival claims and mutual distortions of groups that mistrust and demonize one another” (Sally A. Brown, *Connections*). A therapist once said something that hit me like a brick. “You’re actually defined more by who you choose to hate than who you choose to love.” Let that sink in. What/who is shaping you? Friends, hate is not love. The tool for resisting evil in all its forms is love. People persist in talking about the ‘good guys’ and the bad guys’ in movies and in life.

Nevertheless, the ‘good guys’ are just as susceptible to evil as the so-called ‘bad guys.’ Surely we all recognize this. It is a description of the struggle of the godly person against their own worst impulses. If we are to “repel that which is evil,” we must practice the spiritual disciplines of scripture reading, prayer, and Christian fellowship. To “repel that which is evil” requires daily re-grounding in the faith so that we can accurately discern the line between good and evil. But we are not left to our own resources in this predicament. Something has changed. The entire Christian message is grounded in the biblical announcement that God has done a new thing and will continue to do a new thing in and through us. The Church is continually being conformed to the mind of Christ” (Rutledge).

Listen again to Paul’s no-nonsense vision of Christian living- both in and outside of the church. Listen to what can happen when we don’t

conform to this world and are transformed by the renewing of our minds, discerning the will of God. Love is genuine when...we turn away from evil, holding on to what is good. Love is genuine when...we love one another with mutual affection. Love is genuine when...we outdo one another in showing honor. Love is genuine when...we do not lag in zeal and serve the Lord. Love is genuine when...we rejoice in hope, are patient in suffering and persevere in prayer. Love is genuine when we contribute to the needs of our sisters and brothers and extend hospitality to strangers (vv. 2, 9-13). One scholar specifically comments on the reflection of God's love through hospitality. "We must move beyond hospitality as charity to hospitality as an act of justice. Hospitality as charity offers crumbs from our tables; hospitality as justice offers a place at the table. In our world, hospitality involves transformation of the system that is inhospitable to so many" (Eleazar S. Fernandez, *FOW*). This is one of the big reasons we have a justice ministry and work with GOAL.

No, this list of characteristics is not a greeting card slogan nor a Nike campaign; it's a call to costly discipleship (Rochelle A. Stackhouse, *FOW*). Genuine love is radical. Someone commented the other day how much they love this church. He said we're his chosen family that feeds, protects, and nurtures him and all of God's people. That's not us as individuals, that's Holy Spirit transformation at work among us! The first few words of our mission statement are to share Christ's love. We try our best to show love to all. This isn't our own brand or idea of love. This is love that comes only from God. I saw a quote the other day that

about sums it all up: “Telling people that God loves them is good theology. Showing people that you love them is what transforms the world” (Jim Palmer). Love is an action verb, and it’s also a spiritual practice/discipline. I invite us all to take these verses and cut them into half verses. Choose one a day for the month of June and pray for the Holy Spirit to transform you so that we all can be transformed by love and not conform to the ways of this world. Friends, “How we treat one another is the heart of the Christian witness and mission of the church” (Karen Baker-Fletcher, *Connections*). And worshiping and serving the Lord cannot happen only on Sundays. As author Alice Walker said, “Anybody can observe the Sabbath, but making it holy surely takes the rest of the week.” One of our members this week said from her hospital bed in hospice care, “Imagine what the world would look like if we all lived and loved like Christ!” Imagine talking the talk AND walking the walk! Amen.