

“Life Together”
Acts 2:37-47; Romans 12:1-13;
Matthew 25:31-46

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We have been thinking about the story of our lives from a perspective of a journey of Christian faith, where we begin with coming into faith and realizing we can trust in God. God is a gracious God that invites us to have that trust and that faith. We are then called into community, and to be part of a body together. We’ve talked about some of the struggles with that as human beings because it feels like we have some predilection to create groups and identify some as “other,” to create barriers and boundaries. Yet, we are called to be together in Christ.

Another struggle with community is the very context in which we live. While I believe fully that we are called to be a community around following Christ, the world around us sometimes gives us different messages. I’ve always been struck by that song by John Lennon, “Imagine,” in which this wonderful tune is inviting us to imagine that there is no heaven, and to imagine that there is no religion, and then everything will be conflict-free. I feel like we live in that world where there is that sense of “We just need to get rid of religion and then everything would be OK.”

I’d be curious, if we took time to think about it, would the world be better off without religion? We can parse the term “religion” because it has a lot of baggage today. When we think about religion, we don’t think about just people having faith in God. We often think about the institutions and the people and the way they act. Institutions and people are what they are. They all have their struggles, but does this mean we should get rid of that impulse to put those together? Religion is basically the impulse that comes from believing in a God, trusting in a God, thinking that God is important. We live in a context where even that impulse is being blamed for a lot of things.

The Wired Word this morning was talking about a survey that was done in England where 47% of the people thought that the world would be a better place without any religions. Oftentimes religions are blamed for all the conflict we have. It feels like people will say the reason we have conflict, particularly wars, is because of religion. It is in this context that we are trying to figure out how to be a people together as a body of Christ. I’d like to say as an aside that while religion is being blamed as a cause for wars, this report notes that:

“It is not obvious that either of the world wars that highlighted the 20th Century were directly caused by religious factors... When localized Islamist or Jihadists murders today are set into the broader context of the two wars, they are very small in scale. In addition, of the four dictators in the 20th Century most responsible for killing millions and millions of people, including their own citizens—Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong, Pol Pot, and Adolf Hitler—they were committed atheists, and Hitler’s religious beliefs were by no means conventional.”

Yet we live in this context where it feels like not only just religion, but Christianity, is blamed for all these problems—that we have wars, that we have struggles. If this were a religion of conflict, what would we expect the first followers of the leader of that religion to do? They should have come out with swords drawn into the Roman society and begun to force their way on others. Is that what we see? That description in Acts, what did they do? There was sharing, and healing, and worship. Not a religion of conflict. These folks didn't see themselves going out and using violence to conquer the world. They offered the very love and grace of God and lived together in a way that they shared what they had, they cared for one another, they healed, and they worshiped. That was the starting point.

Now, sometimes I wonder if part of the reason that religion and Christianity in general gets a bad name is because it does say not everything is good, and if you don't want to have to make any distinctions and if you want to never think that you've ever done anything bad, then maybe you can point and say that religion is bad. And it feels to me like we in general have the view that religion is judgmental.

I think about what Paul said in our passage from Romans: Let your love be genuine, Hate what is evil. Hold onto what is good, and outdo each other in showing honor and being respectful. Who wouldn't want to live in that kind of situation? It does make me wonder why our religions have been shaped into something opposite from that. We have recognized over the last few weeks in worship that God is faithful. He has called us into the fellowship of his son Jesus Christ, into the family of faith—a place where our hearts are held, God's grace is given, love is shared. We are called into that family of faith, a place where we share our lives and our livelihood, where we share in the grace of God.

We could become defensive and try to argue with people that violence is not what our religion is about, but since, as I noted last week, argument seems to be a metaphor of war, it doesn't seem to be helpful. We could say we want to change that metaphor into one that has a way of getting past that, more a metaphor of dance where you may be awkward in trying to figure each other out at first, but you are trying to find a way to move forward together, and to move into life. I don't think we're going to go out and change that metaphor overnight.

If we want to convince the world that our faith is not a violent faith, it feels to me that the best place to start is by simply living out what Paul is talking about. Let our love be genuine. Hate what is evil. Hold onto what is good. Outdo each other showing honor and respect. If we do that, if we begin to let our lives be shaped by what Christ has called us to do, by being what Paul recognizes is his call and our call to be followers of Christ, then we bring peace and model the way to peace. The amazing thing about Matthew 25 to me is the surprise. When did we do that, Lord? When did we feed you or give you drink or clothe you, or come to visit you, or welcome you? Living out our faith means paying attention to others, not creating barriers and rejecting the other.

Paul starts out today's passage from Romans by talking about being transformed. It is in following Christ, in following Jesus, that I feel like we are called into this place of transformation that allows us to recognize the love that God has given us, and to allow love to become part of who we are, and to share it. The interesting thing about it is that so often I think about when I go out of the house I'm going to put on my public face. The thing about faith is that it says there's no public face. It's all the same. It's consistent. It's a consistent desire to recognize the love of God and to share it.

We live in a world with so many faces, but we have a faith that calls us to one. To let our love be genuine, to hate what is evil, to hold onto what is good, and to outdo each other in showing honor and respect. It's fairly simple, but incredibly hard. It is the invitation to bring to the world the very thing the world needs most, because in doing those things I believe we also bring peace. We bring reconciliation. We bring grace. We become the world God wants the world to be.

So as we think about what it means to live together as a body, it means caring for one another and all those around us. It doesn't mean one face at church and one face out in the community. Not one face at church and one face at home. It's consistently learning and allowing God to transform us, and being genuine in our love—hating evil, holding onto what is good, and outdoing one another in showing respect. Amen.