

Beloved Community
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Rev. Mary Koon
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This morning we will turn to Paul's letter to the church in Rome. A church that he didn't start, but one that was supporting some of the small churches that were forming in places like Ephesus and Galatia.

Paul's words may be easy to understand, yet more difficult to put into action. Listen now to how God may be speaking to you through Romans 12:3–18.

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.

⁴For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, ⁵so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.

⁶We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; ⁸the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

⁹Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹²Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.

¹³Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. ¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. ¹⁷Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. AMEN

I grew up in the church, where I spent hours in Sunday School, singing in the choir, hanging out in youth group, and later helped out in those areas. My home church formed me (for the good) from birth, and I recognize how fortunate I was. Not everyone has that experience.

As it still is today, on Sunday mornings, I loved getting to church early. My dad was an early bird, too, and we'd often leave my mother and brothers in bed as we drove on nearly empty streets with the sun peeking over the horizon.

But the rich experience of a church community was not a part of my life in early adulthood. I was too occupied with college life, schoolwork, and Saturday nights out.

Once, when my dad was visiting me, he asked me about it. "Dad," I said, "I can still be a Christian without going to church." And I'll never forget what he said. "Mare. That's just not how it works. You cannot be Christian alone. You need the church, and the church needs you."

And you, Oak Grove, understand that, too.

In our discernment process, you identified deep relationships as one of our core values. We believe that we are created to be in relationship. We simply cannot practice faith by ourselves, that's what my dad was saying

to me those years ago. Community relationships are foundational, they allow us to support one another and hold one another accountable.

And further, during the dream day we had in December, we heard clearly the desire for engagement in more intergenerational relationships and activities. The church is one of the only places I know where people from five generations can be together in learning, worship, service and care.

Relationship is the heart of who we are as human beings. We belong to each other. We need each other. There is no church without all of us.

From the Israelites wandering in the wilderness to their exile in Babylon and return, to the first churches in the book of Acts, to the first home churches in the 1st century, to our communities of faith today, God's people have always wrestled with what it looks like to do life together while caring for God's wider world.

Jesus shows us the most excellent way, the only way, really, love. Through his model of loving, healing, teaching and justice making, through stories and exhortation, he teaches us how to treat one another and care for the world.

Many of the New Testament epistles were written to young churches, all of whom were just learning what it meant to be a newly formed community doing something radical, seeking to follow Jesus together. The letters address concerns about how to share resources of money and food and what is required of church leaders (Titus, 3:11), and how the Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians should and must get along.

These new churches were living in challenging times, Roman occupation, poverty, illness, famine, drought and competing values all around them. The letters served as encouragement and correction, urging

the faithful to cling to Jesus and his teachings and example, trusting in his promises of salvation and new life.

We, too, live in times that are challenging for church life. For the first time since Gallup started measuring, U.S. church membership has fallen below the 50% mark. (It was 73% when Gallup first began measuring in 1937.)

Today, families busy and stressed. Many of us feel the effects of long Covid isolation. Media gives airtime to representation of Christians who are hate-filled and violent. And, as a society, we are daily reminded of racism, climate change and the rise of gun violence.

And yet, here we are, still following Jesus and learning what it means to be disciples in the 21st century.

As it has always been, deep, strong, relationships of care and accountability don't happen overnight, they take time and intentionality. Mutuality is experienced through sharing life, listening, serving, praying, celebrating, and crying together.

It is sometimes tempting to give in to the things that destroy community, gossip, factions, stubbornness, the feeling that we always need to be right. Today's text serves as a beautiful reminder of all we are called to do and be as a community of faith.

Paul reminds us that the church is a *body* with Christ as her head and each of us, essential parts. Christ's church is an organic entity, and the image illustrates that we are part of an interconnected web of mutuality with God, each other and the earth. Like our bodies, the church grows and changes. It thrives when everyone is valued, everyone is needed.

I am here to tell you that you matter. We are not the church without you. (And whomever else the Spirit sends our way!).

In our passage, Paul places before us verbs that paint a picture of what vibrant, healthy life together looks like. Listen to them: love authentically and mutually, cling fast to all that is life-giving, keep energized, rejoice, have patience through the tough stuff, share your resources with others, throw parties when the good stuff happens, and be a steady presence when things go sideways. Be humble. Befriend the little guy. Pray, pray, pray. Trip over yourselves offering hospitality and honor.

Which reminds me of the time that the late Frank Bliss brought coffee and donuts to protestors who showed up one Sunday, spewing hate and calling because they objected to our inclusive stance and love of all humans. His gesture of generous grace and hospitality in the face of anger spoke volumes of Christ centered living. He blessed the persecutors.

Like our youth sang last week, we ARE how we treat each other.

Again, relationships of trust take time. Whether that's time with God, listening to someone's story that's different from your own, learning about an issue, working with a youth, playing with a toddler, protesting at the capital, cooking a meal, holding the hand of a dying person, the time is worth it.

This all makes me think of the beloved community, that Martin Luther King Jr. popularized in the 1960's. A vision of mutuality, respect, care, and love that he believed was possible. A world where racism, poverty and oppression are no more, and every human has enough.

In just a few minutes we will share in the sacrament of communion.

Communion is a practice of radical hospitality, as we share a common loaf and cup, and Christ invites all in. This is where we enact the beloved community until it comes in its full expression.

Tom Watson, the pastor of First Pres in South St. Paul tells a story of communion that is dear to his church.

Tom frequently visited an older member of his congregation, a woman, let's call her Betty. Tom and Betty enjoyed their time together, talking, watching TV. One day, after a nice, long visit, and sharing her favorite snack of Oreos washed down with Mountain Dew, Tom looked at this dear woman and said, "Oh Betty, if I had remembered, I would have brought us communion to share."

"Isn't that what we just did?" She responded.

We are nourished and strengthened at Christ's table. We are united by love, whether we are here in person, or at home, or up at Clearwater as the men are doing this morning.

We who are many and one in Christ come to this table over and over to remember Jesus' life, death, and resurrection AND, we come to remember, as in putting the pieces of the body together again, the arms and legs in order to go into the world as Christ's ambassadors, loving above all else. May it be so. AMEN