

Living with People

Series: Pathway of Peace

Romans 12: 9-21

A few weeks ago, I asked some of the newest members of this congregation a question -- “why?” Why Crossroads? Why did they choose to come to Crossroads Church? It is a question I’ve asked other people here at other times. I’ve also asked other congregations the same question and, overwhelmingly, the answer is community.

Crossroads’ core identity, more than contemporary worship or progressive theology, is the strength of its community. Sometimes community is contentious. Occasionally it is cliquish. Mostly it’s supportive. It’s always challenging and always life-giving.

Community is vital to the Christian faith. Religion has been defined as “a way of life organized [in response to] experiences and convictions concerning ultimate power.” The organized part has to do with specific practices such as worship and a shared life. These are rooted in community.

Christianity is virtually unthinkable without community. In the flux of our theological questioning and the crucible of the changes in our lives, community is often all that keeps us going. It is through living in community that we are discovering and living the vision of *Shalom*. Remember that *Shalom* is the biblical vision of peace, living holistically and wholly connected with God and with all people. It is the large vision that has guided people of faith since Moses. It was the vision of the Hebrew prophets. It was the vision of Jesus.

Is *Shalom* the vision that guides us. How will we work toward it? This is the subject of my sermon series during Lent. The first theme, last week’s sermon, was the necessity of leaving home, of being open to the *new thing* God is doing in our lives. The God of new is not necessarily safe, but is absolutely good. Life in this God is risky and passionate. It is not managed reality, but open to the new.

Today’s theme is living with people – living in community and in relationship. How does community lead toward the vision of *Shalom*? How do we move toward *Shalom* in community? I suggest that it is precisely through community that we move toward *Shalom*.

Shalom was the large vision guiding the Apostle Paul as he prepared to go to Rome to face trial and to meet the Roman Christians. Paul’s letter to the Romans was the closest Paul ever came, in the New Testament to writing a sermon in the form of a letter – an Epistle.

Paul wrote to the Roman Christians before ever meeting them – unlike his other letters which were to congregations he knew well. He advises the Romans how to live in families and in community with each other. Paul knew that the concrete action of living in community guided by the vision of *Shalom* is what moves the world toward what the gospels call the rule, or reign, or Kingdom of God.

What was the situation, the context, of the Roman Christians that prompted Paul’s words? Roman culture was very stratified – very class conscious. People from different social stations were held to have a different value, contrary to equality of Christian community. So, Paul emphasizes to them how important it is to “love one another.” *Live in mutual affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Extend hospitality to strangers. Live in harmony with one another. Don’t be haughty, but associate with the lowly.* These are the themes Paul stressed to the Roman Christians. You can see that Paul challenged behaviors that to many Roman Christians seemed to be the most natural thing in the world.

What about us? How do we measure up to Paul's expectations of community? How might we do better? What are some of the implications of taking this challenge, to be Christian community, more seriously?

Paul advises, *let love be genuine*. Where do you experience genuine love in your life? Where is it missing? What do you need to find it? Paul counsels, "Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it."

Hate what is evil. Hold fast to what is good. What do you hate? How do you feel about that? What is the good in your life you try to hold on to? Love one another with mutual affection. Trust in the love coming back to you. This is a big part of living in community. *Be good friends who love deeply; [even] practice playing second fiddle.*

Outdo one another in showing honor. How can you honor someone with whom you fundamentally disagree? What about someone you have a hard time liking? Community is the place to practice this honoring. It is the context that lets us stretch ourselves in this way. Remember that honoring is more about actions than feelings.

Don't burn out. Keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Practice loving your self. Trust that those who love you might just be right. Do what gives you life.

Rejoice in hope. Be patient in suffering. Persevere in prayer. Be cheerfully, expectant. Don't quit in hard times and pray all the harder. Faith is for the long haul.

Contribute to the needs of the saints. Extend hospitality to strangers. Community means putting our money where our collective mouth is. It is also not our place or responsibility to judge others. It's easy to criticize and challenging to be good stewards in our own lives.

Bless your enemies and no cursing under your breath.

Laugh with your happy friends when they're happy. Share tears when they're down. Community means not being afraid of connecting with the feelings of others. It means sharing those feelings. At the same time, there is a corresponding need to know and set our own *personal boundaries*.

Get along with each other. Don't be stuck-up. Make friends with nobodies. Don't [try to] be the great somebody.

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Don't hit back. Discover beauty in everyone. This is good personal policy, good community policy, and would be good national policy as well.

If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. We're not talking about the collusion of cowardice. This is not a conspiracy of silence, of pretending not to hear voices of those crying, working not to see injustice in our lives or on our streets. In the service of justice, *try to get along with everybody*.

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. For me, this is not a matter of waiting for God to get *them*. It is trusting that there are consequences to thoughts and actions and they don't depend on you or me to make them happen. As a nation, we don't need to police the world. We also cannot live in isolation from the world. We are part of a global community, ever more connected, vulnerable and powerful together.

At this point in his letter, Paul seemed to remember a question and responds to it with "No," then follows with a quotation. *Our Scriptures tell us that "if you see your enemy hungry, go buy that person lunch, or if he's thirsty, get him a drink. Your generosity will surprise him with goodness."* This message is for the nations of the world, for the powerful and also for the oppressed: *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.* This is true for our nation

and true for our political process. Two wrongs don't make a right. So, *don't let evil et the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good.*

Living toward the vision of *Shalom*, what can you and I do to strengthen the community of at Crossroads Church? One way to begin is to decide how you will respond to these questions:

What do you need from the Crossroads community?

What would you change at Crossroads if you could?

How would you fill in these blanks?

I need my faith community to _____ for me?

I need someone in my faith community to _____ for me?

I need my faith community to accept _____ from me?

We are building and reshaping sacred community here at Crossroads Church. This is a physical shape of the vision called *Shalom*. It is a vision of God who is free – who is not the property of any religion or any political system. We are attempting to live this vision as a concrete community of people living actual lives in real time. It's almost impossible to do that for long.

Another letter of Paul's was to the Galatians. "O foolish Galatians, having begun in the Spirit, are you now to be made perfect in the flesh?" (Gal. 3: 1a, 3b) We begin in the power of the Spirit, the excitement of call, and the strength of communal resolve. Inevitably, with time and human nature, we settle into more comfortable, less just, and less faithful way of living.

The call still resounds in the depths of our soul. It reminds us to try again because we live in holy space and we walk on holy ground. Author Elizabeth O'Connor provides words of comfort and challenge:

What stirs in our hearts will never correspond with what we are able to transpose onto paper or canvas or to shape into buildings and institutions [and churches]. Trying is all that matters.... When the book is written or the institution built, it will fall short no matter how much blood it costs. Then there is nothing to do but write another book, paint another picture, start another project, dream another dream, see another vision. If it has to do with the lifting up of valleys and the leveling of mountains, the supernatural aid will be given again. (from *Eighth Day of Creation*)

May the community we shape and continually reshape here at Crossroads Church be a community of the Spirit, dying and being reborn.