

The Good Life  
Text: Romans 12:1-2, 9-21  
The Reverend Christopher A. Henry  
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*“Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.” Romans 12:12*

Last Saturday evening, after I spent the day on a wonderful Men’s Retreat in North Georgia with some of you, Sara and I stopped in Dahlonega to hear John McCutcheon, a world-renowned hammered dulcimer player and folk music singer. Sara and I knew a little about McCutcheon, but quickly learned that we were the novices in the crowd, which consisted almost entirely of older men and women who had surely been listening to him for most of his thirty-six year musical career. At one point he celebrated the fact that, unlike when he had given a concert at Eddies Attic in Decatur, here he needn’t worry about the audience having babysitters waiting at home. Sara and I were certainly outmatched in wisdom, knowledge, and years. What was so moving for me was to listen and watch as those sitting around us sang along to almost every word of every song.

The best example of this was the song titled, “Kindergarten Wall”, in which McCutcheon describes how the most important and long-lasting lessons of his life were all contained in a poem that hung on the wall of his kindergarten classroom. Picture the scene: a room full of people who attended kindergarten many decades ago, singing together these words:

Of all you learn here remember this the best:  
Don’t hurt each other and clean up your mess  
Take a nap everyday, wash before you eat  
Hold hands, stick together, look before you cross the street<sup>i</sup>

At the end of the song, there was applause, there was laughter, and there were even some tears—as we thought of the simple and profound message we had just heard. Then, in that small music hall in Dahlonega, I thought of the words of the Apostle Paul, in the twelfth chapter of Romans. That is because Paul’s long list of proper Christian behavior in this passage reads an awful lot like a list of rules taped to a classroom wall. It sounds like something your mother might tell you.

Paul begins the chapter with words that signal a transition in the overall scope of the letter: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God...” In other words, “of all you learn here, remember this the best.” And then Paul begins his utterly exhausting catalogue of Christian moral code, a kind of laundry list for ethical living. All of the great Christian virtues make the list: love, hope, joy, peace, patience. One could be forgiven for thinking that Paul has simply thrown everything but the theological kitchen sink into this random collection of commandments

But, there is at least one organizing principle, one element of unity that holds all of these instructions together. Love one another. Outdo one another in showing honor. Contribute to the needs of the saints. Rejoice with those rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live peaceably with all. Did you catch the theme running like a ribbon through this list?

All of these commands, it seems, concern how we are to live with one another. This, then, is a list of rules for life in the human race, where we will inevitably and often encounter other human beings.

Paul might have included, “Don’t hurt each other, clean up your mess, hold hands, stick together”, but he never had the opportunity to attend kindergarten. Still, for Paul, as for our kindergarten teachers, the most important lessons for Christians to remember have to do with social ethics, how to live in harmony with one another. Or, as Joanna might say, how to be sweet to each other.

These verses are neatly divided into two distinct sections; the first focuses on life within the community of faith, the second centers on how Christians are to live in the secular world. Both provide powerful, timely direction for Christians who live, as the Roman church did, in a time of deep division in the church and uncertainty in the surrounding world. Does it sound familiar?

You see, to be a Christian in Rome was to be part of a brand-new religious sect, one that was comprised of an equal number of Jews and Gentiles. Though it began as an entirely Jewish movement, by the time this new movement had reached the huge imperial city of Rome, there had been many new converts from Roman imperial and pagan religions. In Rome, and in cities throughout the empire, this caused controversy. Who was to be included in the community? All of Paul’s churches struggled with this issue. To the congregation in Galatia, Paul wrote so eloquently, “there is no longer Jew nor Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. In Rome, Paul urges the Christians to live as one united community, in genuine love and mutual affection. With joy in hope and patience in suffering.

It is a message tailor-made for a divided church. And so it is a poignant lesson for us in a time in which the church is so marked by mistrust, discord, and constant labeling. In just such a time as this, Paul’s message is to care for one another, to pray for one another, to talk to one another, and perhaps most importantly to listen to one another. I have a close friend who wears a button to every church meeting that he attends. The button says, “A liberal willing to listen.” God forbid that we ever become so puffed up with pride that we forget to listen to brothers and sisters who do not agree with us. Or, as Paul would have it, that we say to another member of the body of Christ, “I have no need of you.”

Of course, this does not mean that we remain silent on issues of importance. Those of you who know me well must know that I do not support or practice passivity. But I do believe that we must all be careful of the idolatry that is inherent in insisting that our way is God's way.

Paul was certainly not opposed to speaking his own mind on matters that he considered significant. But, he was always careful to promote the value of unity in the Body of Christ. He demands that the Christians in Rome be united to one another, because unity is the surest sign that Christ is in our midst.

And, a united Christian community provides the boldest witness to the world of the truth of the gospel. In the second section of this passage, Paul turns his attention to how Christians are to live with others in the wider world. And, although the context is different, the content of his message is the same, with its emphasis on the importance of love and joy and peace, even in the midst of persecution and suffering.

Paul urges the Christians in Rome to act in ways that are counter-cultural in the imperial culture of the day, where strength and power were the most important values. In a context of persecution, Paul advocates blessing one's persecutors and living peaceably with all. In a culture of honor and shame, he commands the Roman Christians to be humble and associate with the lowly. In an era of warfare and vengeance, he requires forgiveness.

According to Paul, the world has been turned upside-down by the radical love of God in Jesus Christ. Therefore, Paul urges the churches in Rome, your ethics must be contrary to the surrounding world.

It appears to have worked. Writing over 100 years later in another Roman province, the early church theologian Tertullian, described the labels placed on Christians by the larger culture: "See, they say, how they love one another, for themselves are animated by mutual hatred; how they are ready even to die for one another, for they themselves will sooner put to death."<sup>ii</sup>

Stanley Hauerwas is a cantankerous and brilliant professor of Christian Ethics at the Divinity School at Duke University. He has become well known in recent years for his emphasis on how the church makes a difference in the world. According to Hauerwas, "the primary social task of the church is to be itself."<sup>iii</sup> The way that the church changes the world is by demonstrating in its own life the power of the gospel. By living out with integrity and dedication the high calling we have received from God, we show the world what is possible. When we love genuinely, when we rejoice in hope, are patient in suffering, and persevere in prayer, when we extend hospitality to others and live peaceably with all, we live out the promises of the kingdom of God. And then, the world looks at the joy and love and hope that is found in the church, and asks about its source. Many of us are at church today because someone, somewhere along the way, showed us the gospel, and we wanted to experience it for ourselves. In them, we saw the good life for which we had longed. Ah, the good life.

We all know how it feels. It feels like giving of yourself to benefit others. It feels like the power of letting go of your stranglehold on possessions and your anxiety about the future and trusting God to be in control. It feels like knowing that you are in the place God intends for you to be.

Have you felt it? Right here, at Morningside Presbyterian, in this hour of worship and prayer? Have you felt it, enjoying laughter with close friends and family? Have you felt, holding a newborn child, or the hand of an elderly friend? Have you felt it, surrounded by the goodness of God's creation or the beauty of music and art? Have you felt it, in tears and anger at the injustice and cruelty of human beings? Have you felt it, when you are simply at home in the world?

The good life. A gift of the Spirit that comes to us even, especially, in the hardest moments.

Tom Long at Emory University tells a story of a woman whom he saw share her testimony in front of her church. The woman was a dancer in a professional ballet company. And when she spoke it was clear that she was more comfortable as a dancer than a speaker. She spoke hesitantly and haltingly. She explained that she was raised in that church. She pointed to the baptismal font, and said that she was baptized as an infant right in that very font. She did not remember this, of course, but she [said] that her father was very proud of that moment and that when she was a little girl, he would often tell her of the Sunday that she was baptized. He would describe the baptismal dress that she wore, he would remember what hymns were sung and what the minister had said in the sermon, and he always ended the story by clapping his hands together and exclaiming, "Oh, sweetheart, the Holy Spirit was in the church that day!" She said that as a child, she would go to worship on Sunday with her parents and would wonder, "Where is the Holy Spirit in this church?" She would look at the brass organ pipes, at the rafters in the ceiling, and at the stained-glass windows, and she would wonder, "Is that where the Holy Spirit is in this church?"

Then she paused for a moment, and everybody in the room leaned forward to hear what she would say next. "As many of you know," she continued, "I lost both of my parents to cancer in the same week, a terrible week, last winter. During that awful week, on a dark Wednesday afternoon, I was driving home from visiting my parents in the hospital, and I was passing by the church. I felt an intense need to pray, and so I came into the church and sat in one of the back pews and began to pray. The church was dark, and in the shadows I prayed and poured out my grief to God, and cried from the bottom of my heart. Some of the women of the church were in the kitchen preparing a meal for a church meeting, and they saw me praying and knew what was happening in my life. They took off their aprons, came and sat beside me in the pew, held my hand, and prayed with me. It was then, the young woman said, that I knew where the Holy Spirit was in this church."<sup>iv</sup>

The good life, said the poster, is to take a nap everyday, clean up your mess, and not

hurt each other.

The good life, said the Apostle, is to live in a community of love and grace with one another.

Long before them both, the prophet said it this way: do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.

Of all you learn here, remember this the best.

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<sup>i</sup> For lyrics and more information on John McCutcheon, see his website: [www.folkmusic.com](http://www.folkmusic.com)

<sup>ii</sup> Tertullian, *The Apology*. Kessinger Publishing Company, 2004. pp 54-56.

<sup>iii</sup> Stanley Hauerwas. *A Community of Character: Toward A Constructive Christian Social Ethic*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981. p 10.

<sup>iv</sup> Thomas G. Long. *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004. p 127.