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September 13, 2026
The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 18:21-35
Genesis 50:15-21
Psalm 103:1-13
Romans 14:1-12

On Friday, like many of you, I watched news coverage of the 9/11 attacks. I remember that day so well. I was home in Charlotte, NC...Hollis was just 6 months old. My aunt Kathy was visiting from South Carolina. The Today Show was on like it was every morning.

And together we watched our world change.

We all did. In that moment, I think we instinctively knew that nothing would be quite the same again. Our sense of safety. Our sense of freedom. Our sense of openness. The loss and the grief was relentless. Fear was inevitable.

But so was resiliency. The downright hard-core grit that was welling up in people's hearts, the determination of our communities to overcome any threat to our wholeness and our peace. And for 25 years, we have lived on the other side of 9/11. Remembering what we lost and at the same time remembering who we are called to be.

I didn't want to reflect on tragedy this morning. At the same time, we can't ignore it. Because throughout history we have known this to be true...we will be challenged to overcome deeply painful moments in our world, moments that tear at the fabric of who we are and what we love. And how those moments shape us is where only our faith can lead us.

However, I don't want to go straight to quotable Bible verses that are removed from the hard questions that so many of us hold. Because in times of tragedy we can quote scripture all day long and grasp the theory of our faith without ever wrestling with the practice of our faith.

So, I'm going to start with some hard questions...What does it mean to live the Gospel, to live the way of love, when the world feels dangerous and uncertain? What does it mean to open wide our doors when we are afraid of who might walk in?

I don't think we have ever had a moment in human history that wasn't marked by some level of apprehension towards people who are different from ourselves. We would be foolish to assume there was some utopian moment in history where humans didn't define the in-crowd and the out-crowd, the safe and the unsafe. We tend to lean towards differentiation in order to define the familiar and the unfamiliar. We rely on knowing who is going to show up at our doors. We label and segregate, put up walls and define borders.

And we may talk about the ideal of *welcome*, but we prefer if the *welcome* we offer adheres to our parameters of acceptability and safety. And...let me also say this...many of those parameters are logical especially when faced with our response to tragedy of any kind.

But logic is not always faithful.

And I think that is where our faith calls us to linger. So, our challenge in such times is to discern when our fear narratives have overcome our love directives.

I love the statement by pastor Craig Sefa in his essay this week about this type of logic. He writes...

At some point the voices on the other side of the chasm became more difficult to understand. Their dialects became increasingly regional or tribalized. Same language, but just different enough that we stopped recognizing it as our own. Eventually we learned to tune out those distant voices of disagreement and instead found comfort in voices and accents that sounded more familiar. We built echo chambers to amplify what we wanted to hear, whether it was true or not, and we stopped hearing any voices that originated outside of that chamber. Somewhere along the way, these echo chambers became bunkers, built not only to hear what we want, but also to keep everyone else out.¹

That rings so true for me when I look at our world right now. Maybe it rings true for you. And so, with this challenge in mind, let's look at what Paul says about moving forward and seeking love beyond the logic.

In our text from Romans Paul is writing to a group of folks who are deeply divided...the Jewish followers of Jesus in Rome had been exiled and are now trying to come back home to a mostly Gentile community of Jesus followers. These two communities are fragmented and fearful of one another. And yet, they needed to learn how to live and work and worship in peace.

And so, Paul is writing to unite these Jews and Gentiles, to encourage a new beginning. It's a rebuilding of a torn structure. A healing of a deep divide. Separating the violence of the Roman Empire from the people living under their rule while also accepting the people Rome had excluded. These were not welcoming times. In fact, this was very likely the most significant division of this historical moment. The division was logical, but it wasn't faithful. Paul knew this and he was trying to encourage a safe path forward for both communities.

The solution? Paul takes the theoretical practice of love and provides a tangible application of welcome, of hospitality, so that these two divided groups could find a way to live in harmony with one another. To build upon their resiliency in times of tragedy and uncertainty.

New Testament scholar John Crossan breaks down Paul's application into two stages. (We've been looking at these texts for the past 3 weeks, but we are going to put them together today so that you get a full picture of what Paul was trying to achieve.)

¹ <https://substack.com/inbox/post/209304892>

Stage 1 – Internal unity

Start by building a strong spiritual foundation within your own community.

In Romans 12:1-13, Paul teaches that we are one body with many members, and we all have gifts to bring to the greater body of Christ. Our healthy foundation is successful when we work together. And when we are strong internally, we can hope and preserve through whatever we may face. We can pray together and take care of one another. And as we get better at those communal skills, we can move to stage 2.

Stage 2 – External unity

Start extending the love that we have built farther afield so that we can welcome the stranger.

Romans 12:14-21 gives specific directives of how to put this theory into practice. We are to bless, weep and rejoice with those who have harmed us. We are to take care of the needs of our enemies. In other words, we are to live life together. Side by side. That means getting to know one another so that there are no longer insiders or outsiders. And...we can carry out the love of Christ with confidence because we have internally practiced it together.

The final image Crossan suggests is that of the table. In Chapter 15 Paul writes...*Welcome one another...just as Christ has welcomed you.* It's a welcome that is meant to bring every person to the table to worship and to break bread together. It's an act of communal faith removed from our fear.²

Sefa builds upon the table imagery and suggests that we leave a few seats open so that our enemies may come and join us. Sefa suggests that...our enemies who are *"just as hungry and thirsty and exhausted as we are, might...sit down to enjoy some refreshment. And perhaps over this shared meal, we may realize that we have more in common than we thought."*

Going back to my earlier questions... What does it mean to live the Gospel, to live the way of love, when the world feels dangerous and uncertain? What does it mean to open wide our doors when we are afraid of who might walk in?

The answers aren't easy. The theory is hard, and the practice is harder. But Paul believes, and I believe, that we can always work to create a more loving, welcoming world together. That we can apply love in new ways. That we can extend hospitality and care and compassion to an ever-widening circle of God's beloved community. It won't be perfect, but we can never give up the belief that welcome is not just an ideal. It is our God given gift. And that is something no tragedy can ever take away from us.

² Crossan, John Dominic, and Jonathan L. Reed. *In Search of Paul: How Jesus's Apostle Opposed Rome's Empire with God's Kingdom*. HarperSanFrancisco, 2004. p.396-397.