

Getting Along

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Romans 13:8-14 and Matthew 18:15-20

It is difficult to watch events unfold in Kenosha, Wisconsin and Jacob Blake and Rochester, New York and Daniel Prude and so many other places without thinking of Rodney King. Perhaps you remember him and the events surrounding his story.

In March 1991, in Los Angeles, King was pursued for speeding. An altercation with law enforcement officers followed. King was beaten repeatedly, and the entire event was captured on videotape. In a later trial for assault and excessive force, the officers were acquitted, prompting critique from Democrat and Republican alike, and more notably, leading to extensive rioting in Los Angeles with significant death and damage.

Famously, as the riots were happening, Rodney King made a television appearance pleading for an end to the rioting. "I just want to say," he said, "can we all get along? Can we, can we get along?"

Sometimes that plaintive cry is misquoted – "can't we all JUST get along." Either way, the hope is clear, at once so possible and so elusive. Can we all get along?

It is a question that families ask. Spouses, children and parents. Churches ask it – congregations and denominations. Communities ask it. Nations do as well. We are asking it in so many ways right now, are we not? Political differences seem so deeply entrenched and intractable, and, in fact, the looming election seems to heighten all of this. "U.S. Political Divide Becomes Increasingly Violent," was one of many articles I have read about all of this.

Before we plow ahead, let me make a few affirmations that might be worth their own extended conversations.

- Getting along does not mean agreeing on everything. That isn't possible, nor is it a very good idea. We need diversities of ideas and perspectives and experiences. We really do.

- Getting along does not come close to meaning that protesting or expressing anger is off-limits. How we do that is, of course, a different question.
- Getting along does not mean subverting disagreement. We will get to that more in a minute, but it's important to say that we do not swallow our feelings and thoughts in order to smooth things over.
- Getting along does not mean allowing things to slide, whether in personal relationships or on broader landscapes. Sometimes "Frozen" is right – "Let It Go." But not always.
- Getting along might mean compromise.
- Getting along might mean that we look at our own personal behaviors and beliefs and place them in the context of the values of a larger community – whether it be a family or a church or a society.

The Bible is concerned about exploring our relationship with God, to be sure. Stated broadly, at the same time, it is equally concerned with how that relationship with God is lived out in community. Across the pages and verses, community values matter. Ethics – how we treat one another – matter. They matter whether a person is a member of a particular community or beyond it. That is to say, the biblical witness cares about our "getting along," because it knows that we don't, always, and that we need guidance, regularly.

Today's passages – continuations in our journeys through Paul's letter to the church and Rome and Matthew's gospel – envision the realities that are our lives. How are we to live together faithfully and what happens when we don't?

Several weeks back, while in Rochester, and abiding by all of the health and safety protocols of the great state of New York, I got a haircut. I was the only one in the shop, and the owner, knowing what I do, asked me what I thought about all of this coronavirus stuff. Depending on what you read or who you talk to, you can encounter a wide spectrum of thinking regarding faith and COVID-19. What I was clear to say was that I—unlike some other faith-based perspectives – did not think that COVID was a form of divine punishment, nor did I think that God was testing us with this pandemic. Neither of those perspectives make much sense to me, and if they did at all, I'd need to re-consider some of my most deeply held faith positions.

What I DID say in response, and mind you this was sitting in a barber's chair with a face mask on (!), was that every day, and perhaps even more so in a crisis like that, was an opportunity to live out Jesus' invitation to "love your neighbor." There is nothing good about this pandemic, I said, and yet it's a clear moment where we are invited to embody that vision. How are we doing in the "love your neighbor" universe? Where are we falling short? What does love your neighbor in a pandemic look like? More so, what does love your neighbor look like in the quest for racial justice and equity?

Christian Chakoian writes that: "Loving our neighbor sounds plausible in a world where everyone sees eye to eye, agrees on what is right and wrong, and respects the same measures of fairness and equity. Loving our neighbor sounds possible when we share common values and rules of play, when we trust the neighbor's good intentions, when we respect the same measures of justice.

It gets dicey when these presumptions are stripped away. When one neighbor prioritizes the freedom to bear arms as an inalienable right, and another neighbor cherishes the freedom to wed their same-sex partner, and neither understands the other; when one neighbor promotes individual responsibility to earn a living, and another neighbor advocates minimum wage and health care for all, and neither trusts the other... What does it mean to love our neighbor in times like these?" (*Christian Century*, August 11, 2020)

Paul, writing to a young, struggling, church, knew that the community was searching for ways to order its life – structures and principles and values. He also knew that some – not all, but some – had been formed by Jewish principles, the Ten Commandments foremost among them. That gave Paul something to work with. We often treat the Ten Commandments as a kind of legalistic set of rules, but I had a seminary professor who encouraged us to think of them as a set of guidelines that a family would post on its refrigerator. Of course we don't kill. Of course we won't steal. Of course we will honor your things, and your relationships. Of course, because that's how a family, a community, lives – with respect, with mutual accountability, with love.

"Owe no one anything," Paul writes, "except to love one another." He then rehearses the more human-oriented of the Ten Commandments and summarizes

them – “‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.”

Love your neighbor. What would it look like, I wonder, to begin there, to approach our relationships, our politics, our choices, through the lens of love. This isn't a romanticized, sentimental love, but *agape*, a neighborly love that is rigorous and robust. It is definitionally imperfect because it is we humans practicing it, but even then, in our disagreements and differences, love will transform what that looks like.

And when we fall short. What do we do? Jesus knows that our love is imperfect, that even within the life of the church we will do things to one another, say things, that will cause conflict.

We 21st century human types do not do well with conflict. We do many things other than dealing with it faithfully. We ignore it. We suppress it. We avoid it. Or, we talk about it with others, or tweet or Facebook or Instagram it. None of those address the conflict, and none, per Paul's rubric, are loving or neighborly.

Jesus knows that even within the church there will be disagreements and differences, and some of them significant, about belief or behavior or any number of things. When it happens, when someone sins against you in word or deed, go directly to that person. It might be uncomfortable or awkward or difficult, but do it. Don't talk to others about it. Don't gossip. Don't post online (Jesus didn't say that!). Deal with it – directly and honestly. And lovingly, I would add, honest and compassionate love. If it doesn't work, take a church member or two with you. If that doesn't work, then take the conflict before the whole church, which sounds so foreign to us, and potentially awful, but is a practice done in many church traditions, and is a practice that our own Presbyterian judicial process suggests.

The point is, that in order for a community to live fully into its values, it must find ways to faithfully address when things don't go well. Just as we know that a conflict within a family or a marriage will rarely resolve itself, so it is true for any community, that in order to be loving and neighborly, in order to “get along” with integrity and authenticity, we must address our differences in ways that – while they don't sweep things under the rug – can bring about redemption and healing.

This is no panacea, no wishful thinking. True communal life is never easy, nor should it be. But I can't help but think that our national life together – even in the face of real political disagreement – would feel qualitatively different if we thought of those with whom we disagreed as neighbors, and loved them, even with a grudging love. And I can't but think that all of our relationships – from the most granular with the ones with whom we are currently quarantined to the citizens with whom we are sharing this body politic right now – would be healthier and dare we say happier if we engaged our conflicts in the way that Jesus suggests. Perhaps that can be the contribution we make in the coming weeks, never checking our beliefs and principles at the door, but living in the world in such a way that they will know we are Christians by our love. Amen.