

Keeping Human Life Human

Exodus 2:23-3:15

Matthew 16:21-28

Romans 12:1-2; 9-21

“Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.”

While getting my father an *Inquirer* at an airport newsstand for his trip back to Florida on Tuesday morning, I was stopped in my tracks by the cover of this month's *Philadelphia Magazine* that shouted: WHEN DID PEOPLE GET SO \*EXPLICATIVE\* MEAN? And then whispered: Why we need niceness to make a comeback. I almost let out an explicative when I was told how much the magazine cost, but for the sake of the proclamation of the gospel, I bought it, thinking I might find a secular version of Paul's words to the Romans in our text today. “What is wrong with the world?” the article's editor asks after telling a few preliminary stories that cannot be repeated in the pulpit. “I'll tell you what's wrong with the world: Nobody is nice to anyone anymore. We live in a culture that prizes hot takes and snark, immersed 24/7 in technology that forces us to be terse and childish emoticons that stand in for actual feelings. We no longer have the time or energy to expend on simple pleasantries, like ‘Hey, how are you doing?’ or ‘Can I hold that door for you?’” In response, the magazine offers Philadelphians its own Rules of Etiquette, instructions on how to be nice in restaurants, while driving, in a bar, on public transit, in political discourse, in public spaces, when working out, when on line, when biking, at the office, and when parenting.

At a glance, in twenty one verses, it would appear that Paul does the same. Writing to a congregation of nascent Christians, he offers what amounts to thirty imperatives about how to keep human life human in first century Rome. Like the Rules of Etiquette in *Philadelphia Magazine*, there is nothing new or earthshaking or distinctively Christian in these verses. Paul's imperatives can be traced to Hellenistic sources and Hebrew Wisdom literature. Yet I believe we misunderstand Paul's admonitions if we think they are simply a list of virtues to be practiced by nice people in polite society. Rather Paul is describing the shape that faith assumes in communities that have been transformed by the renewal of their minds in Christ Jesus. He is recounting the behavioral consequences of becoming a people who are attempting to discern and embody not what is nice but what is the will of God in human history.

What prompted Paul to write, some think, was the rise of anti-Judaism in Rome which was also making its way into the church. Back and forth Paul goes in the first eight chapters, reminding Gentile and then Jewish Christians of God's saving purposes in human history, admonishing each for the particular ways they have fallen short, encouraging Jews under the law and Gentiles apart from the law to live together as a people who are dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Then just before the twelfth chapter begins, in a tour de force, Paul traces God's redemptive purposes hidden in his people's rejection of Jesus as Messiah so that, through Jesus, the Gentiles may be included in the covenant of grace. You can literally see Paul struggle in these three chapters to discern God's will and so tell a story completely counter to the story that was presently funding human hatred in the city. In a sense, he models for the congregation the discernment he is about to ask of them.

But discerning God's will is not easy, to say the least! As Christian ethicist Paul Lehmann cautions, “To ask simply, ‘What am I to do?’ and simply to reply, ‘The will of God!’ ignores both what God is doing in the world and the ethical reality of the human situation. ...The more earnestly [we] ask what the will of God is, the more clearly [we] discover that [we] both know and do not know, both will and do not will, the will of God.”

No doubt the apostle's discernment of God's will must have shaken the congregation and caused them to wonder which God Paul was consulting. Was this the God who hated the same people they hated? Or was there a God who loved *them* even when they were enemies of such a God? If the former, nothing need change about their behavior toward the Jewish Christians in their midst. If the latter, then how were they to go about the work of discerning the will of *that* God in relation to their treatment of one another?

As regards the former God, I am thinking in particular about a statement purporting to discern God's will released by the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood on Tuesday. Known as the Nashville Statement, its preamble contends that our post-Christian Western culture “has embarked upon a massive revision of what it means to be a human being.” By this they mean that the culture is denying God's good purposes in our personal and physical design as male and female by its acceptance of LGBTQ individuals. It then goes on to ask, “Will the church of the

Lord Jesus Christ lose her biblical conviction, clarity, and courage, and blend into the spirit of the age? Or...will she maintain her clear, counter-cultural witness to a world that seems bent on ruin?" Faithfulness for these Christians "means declaring once again the true story of the world and of our place in it—particularly as male and female." Fourteen articles follow, written in the style of the Barmen Declaration. For the signers of the Nashville Statement, 134 men and 14 women (just saying), the statement offers a simple answer to a simple question.

For LGBTQ Christians who were raised in a community of faith that identified God with the part of our culture marked by a confident and sometimes mean-spirited rejection of them (back to the *Philadelphia Magazine*), discerning God's will and doing it are nothing if not complex. As Eliel Cruz, Executive Director of Faith in America, reminded readers in his Op Ed on Friday, "the statement sent a particularly dangerous message to the approximately half of LGBT people who, according to the Pew Research Center, identify as Christians. You don't belong in our religion. And anyone who so much as accepts you isn't Christian either." Cruz goes on to cite the high rates of suicide, anxiety and depression among LGBTQ youth who have been rejected on the basis of their family's faith and reading of Scripture.

But for the apostle Paul, discerning God's will in Scripture as he addressed anti-Judaism in Rome was no simple matter. Lehmann also goes on to remind us that "One cannot think as a Christian without presupposing a certain way of understanding the [biblical narrative]. The relation between Christian faith and the text of the Bible is too complex to allow a simple derivation of the faith from the text or of the text from the faith. The reality and activity of God, the shaping of a community of faith in [response to God's] activity, the apprehension of [God's] activity and the historical life and destiny of the community of faith—all are involved in the simple act of taking up the Bible to read." Paul could have discerned God's will as many before and after Paul did, believing the Jews to be rejected of God and headed for eternal damnation. It is the reading of Scripture which has underwritten anti-Semitism even to this day.

Instead Paul wrestled with the complexity of God's relationship to God's children, children who invariably reject the God who loves the people God's children hate. Paul came to believe that God has used the sin of each to show mercy toward all. He then writes, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice..." In other words, offer up, let go of, lose your life as you have plotted it. Then, sounding for all the world like the Nashville Statement, he writes, "Do not be conformed to this world..." Paul means by that: give up the stories the world is telling you about the other you have defined yourself over and against, quit the stories religion is telling you about your own better self, and "be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect."

What then follows are not thirty ways to be nice but admonitions pointing to the shape faith assumes in a community transformed by the incarnation of God's self-emptying love in Jesus Christ: the love that is love that is love. Paul's admonitions are describing what this love looks like in a community of faith. I think Angelia Griffin was doing the same when she wrote this week from Houston, "There is not much in the world that I can truly say I hate. But I *hate* Harvey...Harvey has taken so much away from so many. Homes, lives, hopes, jobs—all washed into the Gulf of Mexico by his relentless anger. Yet in the deluge...Harvey has also washed away something else—hatred. The only color in Houston today is *red, white and blue*. The only religion in our streets is *love*. There is no race, no creed, no gender, no socioeconomic classes, no nationality, no sexual-orientation, no religion. There are only people helping people. There are only strangers opening the door to strangers. There are only men and women risking their precious lives for other precious lives. For a stunning moment the world has stopped fighting *against* each other and started fighting *for* each other. It's breathtaking."

Then Griffin admonishes us: "Take note world. You don't need to wait for a devastating disaster to love. You don't need to wait until your neighbors are drowning to reach across the color, religious, nationality, political boundaries. This world is suffering a different kind of storm, one far more dangerous than Harvey—a storm of hatred. Let's refuse to let it break us."

Paul could not have said it better! *Let love be genuine, hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good.* "The power to will what God wills," Lehmann concludes, "...is the power to be and stay human...to be truly and fully [your]self in being related to others who also have the power to be truly and fully themselves. The Christian *koinonia* is (together you are) the foretaste and sign in the world that God has always been and is [even now] doing what it takes to make and to keep human life human." Thanks be to God. Amen.