



Reflections for Sunday, August 30, 2020

Good morning church, and Facebook friends, I am Lisa Williams pastor at San Pedro United Methodist Church. We are glad to be worshipping with you this fine summer day.

This week has been filled with many challenges from fires ravaging through California, Hurricane Laura devastating Louisiana and Texas with 14 dead, as of Saturday morning and thousands of people left without power and fresh water.

Sadly, another shooting – Jacob Blake shot by Kenosha Police and two additional deaths by a 17-year-old boy during a protest. At home, our church community has been shaken with the news of Lynn Mihovils’s husband Don, who passed away in his sleep earlier this week. Lots to hold and carry in our hearts.

Given what we have experienced this week after looking at the text Romans 12:9-12, which is all about ways for living in harmony with each other. I found this cartoon. It seems you can never go wrong with a Charlie Brown cartoon. Lucy is telling Linus that he will never be a doctor because you don’t love mankind, that’s why! Linus replies “I Love mankind...it’s people I can’t stand!

So important to find laughter in and amongst hard times. That is why we are going to do a virtual blessing of backpacks for our kids, youth, and teachers as they head back to school. It may seem a bit silly to hold our backpacks up the computer screen but even more reason to do it. Here is a list of our kids and youth (hold up paper with their names on it)

Zoe, Anders, Andrew, McKayla, Evan, Lauren, Bria, Kira, Allegra, Zad, Amanda, Ude, Francis, Goodluck, Edith, Allie and Gideon, our girls in Pravaham, our teachers, Mr. Wagoner, John Stephenson and Pastor Lisa. As funny as it seems even John and I are headed back to school. We also lift all children around the world that we do not know that this year of virtual learning will be filled with new adventure, and laughter as they all learn new ways to engage with one another.

Before we bless our backpacks, I want to tell you a quick story. The other day Peter, Steven, and I were playing cards. We had not played this card game in a while so there was lots

of discussion about the right way to play. Finally, we had to look up the rules and decided to follow them. Apostle Paul taught the people a long time ago what the instructions were and how to follow Jesus and ultimately the people had to make a choice to follow those rules. Here are some of the things Paul said, rule number 1 “love one another,” meaning we should do our best to love our family members, friends and neighbors and all people really. Rule number 2 “serve the Lord,” we should do things to please God. Rule number 3 is to “live in harmony with one another,” which means that we are to treat others as we would like to be treated and try hard to be peaceful with the people around us. Now this can be hard to do because we all get angry, hurt, and frustrated at times. But when we do that is when we must go back to the instructions that are given to us in the Bible. Because it is always so much more fun to follow the instructions and play the game correctly.

Today’s blessing comes from the perspective of the student and the congregation:

Dear God, we hold our backpacks high asking for a blessing as we go back to school. Some of us have started school already on the computer. It is different, it is not the same, but I guess it is okay. We miss seeing our friends and playing at recess. God, Will you be my friend this semester? Since you are all around us will you help show me how to use my backpack and computer well so I can learn and grow. Also, it would be helpful if you would give an extra dose of patience to my parents and teachers - they are going to need it! Thanks God

God of learning watch over our children that this year they may experience new ways to explore and learn about your world. May they find laughter in each day. Help guide them to know that you are ultimately their best friend and all they need. While you don’t play tether ball at recess, you can be a constant friend that will never leave their side. We also ask for prayers for the parents and teachers. Help them to be present in the lives of their children and students. Give them the patience needed to make it through each day. and ultimately give them permission to have fun during this new adventure. We ask all this for our children of San Pedro United Methodist Church and all children around the world. Amen.

Today we are going to delve into Romans 12:9-21 and hear what Paul thinks the marks of a true Christian are and some instructions on how we might do that:

⁹ Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰ love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹ Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.^[a] ¹² Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. ¹³ Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly;^[b] do not claim to be wiser than you are. ¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸ If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of

God;^[c] for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”²⁰ No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.”²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Genuine love mentioned here literally means “un-hypocritical” love.ⁱ To not be critical and to rely on faith that is seen through life changing work of grace that results in a lifestyle of obedient love for God and others. Paul is encouraging us to “embrace what is good.” We are being invited to consider love and good to be constant partners that provides context for both attitudes and actions.

Paul tells us “do not repay anyone with evil...if your enemies are hungry, feed them, if they are thirsty give them something drink. David Bartlett in a commentary in 2011 said, “This can be a tough task when we are dealing with someone close at hand – perhaps a neighbor or relative. It is also hard to embody love for the enemy when our whole political system seems to depend on identifying those whom we should fear and even those we should hate.”

Hospitality – when I think about hospitality I think of my mother. She always had cookies or banana bread ready for anyone who might come stop by. But Eleazar Fernandez gives us new insight in the definition of hospitality.

We must move beyond hospitality as charity to hospitality as an act of justice.ⁱⁱ

Many of you know John Stephenson took two classes this summer. The last class he took was on leadership. He shared his paper with me as well as Bishop Hagiya, his professor’s, thoughts.

In a nutshell the class was to write a paper on leadership challenges in these changing times. John did a good job identify some of the challenge’s “church” faces. In the months ahead we will be addressing some of these challenges as we look forward, perhaps reading some of the Bishops recommendations on leadership like, “The Innovative Church.”

John uses a sports analogy to sum up his thesis: “My challenge is how can I be the leader of the team when the clock is running and we need some new plays to turn the game in our favor.”

It is often said that church is a “set apart” mission in relation to the world. What does that mean? What is distinctive about the community called church? How does this community see the world? Just like during the time of apostle Paul, our attempts to understand the inner life of a faith community can only be successful if we consider its relationship to the surrounding world. (Eleazar Fernandez p14)

One of Bishop Hagiya’s comments on John’s paper was, “I appreciate your sense of mission and change of the old paradigm. You understand what needs to be done in light of the transition from attractional to missional.”

Here is a little insight into what some of the current challenge's "church" faces. Eleazar Fernandez puts it bluntly by saying, "It appears churches have become comfortable with the world - that they have lost their identity as an alternative community. Driven by desire for the relevance by the three B's (building, budget and bodies), churches have played footsie with the dominant culture without realizing soon enough that they have gone to be with the culture of dominations, privilege, accumulation and consumption."ⁱⁱⁱ

During this exercise of evaluation what if the "church" were to offer an invitation to a new community that nurtures believers to live differently and live out their calling both in the community and the wider society. Identity and mission are key points. How could it be different if we allowed the power of the Holy Spirit to take over?

Many of us believe that hospitality is a cornerstone of the church. But Fernandez says, "hospitality is the practice by which church stands or falls." But here's the rub about hospitality – Paul is telling us it does not mean just being nice to those who show up on Sunday morning, it does not even mean charitable acts like our mobile showers and "Lunches with Love," it goes beyond those charitable acts. Apostle Paul is challenging us to move the needle to hospitality as an act of justice.

Hospitality of charity offers crumbs from our tables (this is not a bad thing - charitable acts are important and need to be done) but hospitality as an act of justice offers a place at the table.

As we move further into exploring John's leadership challenge, I believe one area to consider is how we bring hospitality as an act of justice to the table.

Some may feel our country is experiencing political divide with COVID, upcoming presidential election, protests, violence, and uncertainty seems to surround our daily lives. And now, we are being asked to come to the table with hospitality as an act of justice. What does that even look like?

Well, it could look like: making sure you are registered to vote, that you encourage your neighbors, friends, children and for some of you grandchildren to vote. Make sure your census is completed and encourage others you know to do the same. We may be at home, but you can call or write family and friends and remind them of ways they can make a difference. Kate and Floyd have volunteered to pick up your ballots and drop them off or we can help you get registered if that is helpful. We can model for our young people that no matter how small the task every voice matters. A preacher's job is not to tell you how to vote but a preacher's job is to bring forth our biblical teachings.

Let love be genuine, hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good. Love one another with mutual affection... if is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peacefully with all.

Can we be an example for the Linus' of the world and show them how to love not only mankind but people too?

Remember what I told the kids earlier, it is more fun to follow the instructions and play the game correctly. Paul has given us the instructions and it is up to us to play the game correctly. Amen

Benediction: Now may the Lord bless you and keep you in the days and months ahead that you may live peacefully with all and that your love be genuine, and your hospitality be acts of justice, today, tomorrow and always. Amen.

ⁱ Feasting on the Word, Year A Volume 4, Rachell A. Stackhouse, (Westminster Knox Press, 2011) p16.

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