

EXODUS 3:1-15
Psalm 105: 1-6, 23-26, 45b

Romans 12:9-21
Matthew 16:21-28

Rev. Rochelle Stackhouse, a pastor in the United Church of Christ, shares a story about a confirmation retreat that involved sixty teenagers. They were asked to come up with a covenant that would govern their behavior over the three-day event. The room erupted in laughter when one teen shouted, “No drama!” Other suggestions followed: Do not talk when others are talking. Respect the leaders. Participate fully in all of the activities. Each teen signed the covenant in agreement, filling the page. During the event, both the leaders and the youth would remind the group of what they had signed as a corrective to behaviors that were outside of the group’s boundaries. Our session usually establishes such a covenant, norms, for our behavior although I don’t think we have done it recently. Often times groups, both those meeting for just one time or those who meet regularly, will create a list of acceptable behaviors for the group. It is not limited to ecclesial, church groups. Many secular organizations and corporations do the same. Such a covenant provides a structure and core values for a group and can lead to more productive and fulfilling meetings.

In his letter to the church in Rome, Paul presented a group covenant as to how this community of faith, the church in Rome, was to behave. Paul’s advice is also to the church today, to you and to me. The New Revised Standard Version Bible that I use, the Oxford Annotated, refers to these as “duties of the Christian believer”. Another NRSV Bible labels this section “marks of a true Christian.” I prefer that label: marks of a true Christian. It includes behavior that I think most of us would agree with. I don’t think many would argue with hating evil, loving one another, and persevering in prayer. There

are a few that are a bit more challenging, but not overly so: contribute to the needs of the saints and extend hospitality to strangers. Yeah, we can do that.

But that was not good enough for Paul. He could not just leave it there. Paul adds some marks of a true Christian that are a little more challenging, to say the least. These concern our relationships with people whom we find hard to love: Bless those who persecute you; do not repay evil for evil; if your enemies are hungry feed them; do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. Most of us don't want to hear this because they go against our gut, our self-preserving instincts, our self-serving sinfulness, our pride and our sense of fairness. It is natural for us to get back at those who want to do us harm. Have you ever watched those "karma" videos on Facebook? For example there is one in which a boy is about to push a girl into a river. As he runs up behind her to push her in, she moves aside just in time and he flies into the river. Or a motorcyclist rushes past a car and rips off the passenger side outside rearview mirror, only to lose control of his motorcycle, crashing it into the guardrail. They got what they deserve. Have you ever heard someone say sometimes it is easier to get forgiveness than permission? Wouldn't it be easier to beg for forgiveness, than to feed our enemies or to overcome evil with good? As Rev. Stackhouse declares, "This passage is not a greeting card slogan but a call to costly discipleship." It is not easy!

It is hard enough to live by these core values, by this covenant, in a community of faith, but to do so in daily life with all we encounter presents even more challenges. As one reads this chapter, it seems like Paul is only describing our behavior within the community of faith. However, when you read the rest of Paul's letters, Paul makes it clear that the Christian is called to live by this different standard in all parts of life. Paul

goes beyond our relationships with fellow Christians and to our relationships with “outsiders.”

What Paul was saying to these Roman Christians –and to us—is that as Christians we are to behave differently. They are not to retaliate when evil is done them; we are not to retaliate when evil is done us. Why? First of all, judgment is God’s business, not ours. Judgment is not our business! Paul never doubts that God will work judgement. Leave it to God. Second, by doing good we may in fact overcome evil, turn evil into good. Paul wrote, “For by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” Paul seems to be saying that by doing good, faithful people bring their enemies to repentance and good lives. By doing good to others, Christians work good, increase good in the lives of others. Sometimes, at least, if we do unto others as we would have them do to us, they will treat us more kindly and generously.

Tracy Kidder, in the book *Mountains beyond Mountains*, profiles the work of Dr. Pal Farmer. Dr. Farmer travels the world establishing clinics to treat chronic diseases like tuberculosis in areas of severe poverty and inadequate health care. He has to deal with the medical establishment, various bureaucracies, and local traditions. Dr. Farmer approaches all people with a “hermeneutic of generosity.” “Hermeneutic” refers to a method of interpretation. So you might say it is a way of interpreting people. What this means for Dr. Farmer is that he evaluates everyone’s actions from an assumption that their motives are good even if, at first glance, one might suspect the opposite. His hermeneutic, his way of interpreting people, is to assume that people’s motives are good. It is similar to a reminder that the Society of Friends, the Quakers, have: that we should look for what is of God in every person.

What do we see in the faces of others? When we see a Muslim, do we think, “Terrorist?” When we see someone who is on welfare, do we think, “Lazy bum?” When we see a Hispanic, do we think, “Undocumented?” Do we extend the hermeneutic of generosity to the person driving too slowly in front of you on the highway, the cashier at the supermarket, your coworkers, classmates, and extended family? Granted such a hermeneutic of generosity is not easy. It is a struggle. Jesus never said it was going to be an easy, care-free ride.

Take a look at what Jesus had to say in our Gospel lesson this morning, Jesus predicted that he would undergo great suffering, be killed and be raised. Peter rebuked Jesus. Jesus responded, “Get behind me, Satan.” No, this is the way for Jesus. Jill Duffield, the editor of the journal the *Presbyterian Outlook*, describes what this means: “Lord, forbid it that you should suffer, sacrifice yourself for the sake of the world, and go into the dangerous, deadly fray of Jerusalem and forbid it, too, that I should follow you there.” How do you think Jesus would respond?

Sometime today, when you go home, read aloud the Romans text? Are there particular traits of a Christian listed in this passage that you find particularly difficult? Choose one that you think you can work on this week, and try to live by it. You are not going to succeed in one week. Yet, by intentionally thinking about it, and intentionally struggling, we can begin to follow Jesus.

At the name of Jesus
every knee will bend
and every tongue confess
that Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God. Amen.