

SLD08.28.05 22nd Ordinary
EPC
Romans 12:9-21
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“So, What’s Next? A Couple Laundry Lists”

When I looked up today’s lectionary text from Paul’s letter to the church in Romans, I was pleased to see that it was one of Paul’s grandiose data dumps, one of his ‘this is everything I want you to know and do’ laundry lists he was forever sending to his favorite churches. You see, Paul loved his churches, deeply loved them, investing himself in their welfare, fretting over their frailties, fussing over their errors, brushing the bangs from their foreheads and the tears from their eyes whenever things went awry.

But since he was often far away from his beloved communities, Paul’s particular manner of fussy mothering usually arrived in the form of yet another laundry list of unsolicited advice, tips, and guidelines for straightening up, which had to get tiresome from time to time to some of those beloved communities. But they dutifully put up with Paul’s hortatory missives because they knew deep down that all that finger wagging was really just Paul’s way of letting them know how much he loved and cared for them.

So when the mail came and the faithful gathered and somebody saw it was from Paul, he’d roll his eyes a little and announce to the crowd, “Quiet down, y’all, and listen up; it’s another of those laundry list of do’s and don’ts from our good friend, Paul. Y’all ready? Here it comes:”

“Let love be genuine; hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; hang out with people different than you; live peaceably with that neighbor you don’t much care for; bring cans of food for the Stephen pantry;

don't let your doubts and fears overcome you, but overcome them with hope and faith.”

You get the idea.

Such bossy one-liners have never made for good preaching. For one thing, nobody remembers somebody else's laundry list, and for another, who likes to be told what to do and how to be like that? But then I figure it's not so much the content of the list that's so important as how Paul and the church feel about each other. I mean, after all, what's Paul really trying to say to the church in Rome except “I love you, God loves you, and if you want to know how to love God and me back, well, this is what it looks like.?”

Well, it so happens that today I have a couple of my own laundry lists of topics and mandates to cover. After all, today is my last Sunday here as Temporary Pastor to enjoy the privilege of the pulpit. And you know us preachers and our goodbyes. And as if that weren't enough, today also marks the end of our summer series on saints. Since June we've been exploring the lives of Augustine, Therese of Lisieux, Thomas Merton, Hildegard of Bingen, Bill W. and Clarence Jordan, each of whom offered the testimony of their life about how the gospel can be lived. And we certainly can't let *them* go, either, without saying goodbye. And the best way I know to do that is by remembering what they taught us.

From brilliant, dark-skinned Augustine, 4th century Bad Boy of Hippo, we learned about the redemptive possibilities rooted in the nutty choices of the young, as well as the importance and relevance of those choices to one's personal journey of maturation and faith. Through the roller coaster ride of his life and faith, St. Gus also made clear to

us the inescapably divided nature of humankind over against the ineffable nature of a God who loves us anyway.

Opposite in every way from St. Augustine was St. Therese of Lisieux, France, who was not a thinker but a feeler, not an adventurer but a homebody, not even a person who lived a particularly full life, if fullness be measured by years. No, Therese's life and intellect were unremarkable and she died young, never having seen much of the world. But despite the brevity and blandness of her life, what Therese *did* see was a great deal *in* the world. And what she saw in the world was God. In fact, everywhere she looked, Therese saw God; in every place, in every person, in every ordinary act of daily life. And so she developed her particular path of spirituality which she called 'The Little Way' for its peculiar simplicity.

To follow Therese's 'Little Way' meant nothing more or less than performing one's everyday actions consciously and intentionally in the presence of the love of God. That was it. No candles, no altars, no prayer beads required. No sacred space or robed intermediary, no church or priest or halos or Hail Mary's; just an active, conscious, constant awareness of God. All the time. I invite you to try it, even for five minutes, and see if you don't find Therese's Little Way a whole lot easier said than done. But the blessings for those who follow it...well... by all reports, they're not little at all.

After Therese, Adam preached about Thomas Merton, a 20th century saint whose personal struggles and writings continue to enrich the lives of seekers today. Of Merton's many, many gifts, Adam highlighted for us Merton's 'normalizing' of the place of doubt in the life of a believer. "Have you ever had a moment in your life where your

world got bigger and more complex and your faith did not?" asked Adam. And who among thinking Christians has not? For that matter, except perhaps for those very special and rare grace-filled moments of the revelation of God's presence, who of us is ever completely free of doubt? Placing his doubt at the foot of God's throne, Merton wrote, "the very contradictions in my life are in some ways signs of God's mercy to me." And in return for gifting to God his honest doubt, Merton records he received in return what he called 'a freeing humility,' a sense of both release and relief that, 'though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death, I will not fear, for you are ever with me and will never leave me to face my perils alone.'

After Merton came 12th century German abbess and mystic, Hildegard of Bingen, Elise's favorite because Hildegard was also a musician, also experienced God through music, and taught her nuns to do likewise. Among the most treasured of Hildegard's many gifts is the holistic approach she took toward the spiritual life, which, in her understanding, encompassed not only one's spirit but also one's mind and body. To Hildegard human beings were 'living sparks of God's splendor,' every man, woman and child equally known, loved and treasured in the heart of God. And with this egalitarian and inclusive view came Hildegard's very high expectations around each individual's personal sense of call, each person's unique, God-given invitation to fulfill God's intention for creation in his or her own particular manner. We are co-creators with God, taught Hildegard. Get with the program!

From Hildegard in the early middle ages, we jumped forward again to the 20th century to the lives of two men who *did* get with God's program. Although they were persons who would no more regard themselves as saints than you or I, the particular

challenges and choices of their lives positioned them to fulfill a portion of God's intention for creation, sure enough - Bill W., founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, and Clarence Jordan, founder of the Koinonia Community.

After Bill W., 1940's stockbroker, drunk and reprobate, hit bottom for the umpteenth time, he somehow, some way, through the grace of God he guessed, figured out what principles and practices it would take for him to recover from his addiction to alcohol. First he made a stab at following the path himself, then he shared it with others. Now, some 2,000,000 members later, folks in AA are still following and sharing Bill W.'s principles and practices that continue to give them a chance of recovery.

Clarence Jordan, scholar, activist and cotton farmer, stood up to racists and nightriders in the deep South in the 50's and 60's and, by entering that gospel 'door of all-out commitment,' as he called it, generally made of himself and his south-Georgia, Christian community, Koinonia, a nuisance to the surrounding segregated society. In later years, through the agency of Millard Fuller, Koinonia morphed into the strong-armed midwife of the international program for affordable housing, Habitat for Humanity.

After hearing from Augustine, Therese, Merton, Hildegard, Bill W, and Jordan, in her sermon entitled, 'To the Saints at Emory,' Sharon Taylor slipped in the clear and faithful point of the whole durn series. And what Sharon told us is that you and I and all us 'sanctified ones,' (which, I like to think, is *all* humanity) are called to be saints, too. Or at least we're part of a saintHOOD, which I take to mean a bunch of hoods blessed by God with sufficient grace to take care of business. To find out what business you, in particular, are meant to be taking care of, you may have to look around and do some

scratching, but likely you'll find it somewhere between what you like and what others need.

So, with gratitude and thanks for the lessons and the lives of the holy ones we met this summer, thus ends Laundry List Number One, but not this sermon – oh no. Anyone needs to stand up and stretch, you go right ahead because we still have Laundry List Number Two yet to go.

'Cause I haven't gotten to the part yet about this is my last sermon as Temporary Pastor so hadn't I better review everything that's gone on these last eight months and the many possibilities for the church's future? After all, today marks yet another transition for this church and that's what transition times are good for: figuring out where you are, where you've been and where you're headed. And while I don't intend to sketch out the whole timeline of events since last January when I came on board, I believe we need to claim and honor and bless God for the strides made in this church, not only in measurable enhancements of program and staff but in the tone and tenor of the community.

In fact, maybe that's the most important shift to celebrate. Not just the mechanics of hiring Adam as our Youth Minister, supporting Glenda and the church office during her pacemaker ordeal, renewing Elise's contract for another three years, installing a new class of elders, experimenting with new mission initiatives, retreating with Session, meeting with Marketers, 'workshopping' with Presbytery, missioning in Puerto Rico, and exploring multiculturalism in New York, but the palpable shift of mood and disposition in the church.

To me, things feel different. Not that much has changed really – everything looks the same – but there's more light, more laughter, more warmth, more silliness, much, much kindness, and much hope. Am I imagining this? Do any of you know what I'm talking about? I don't think I'm making it up. I like being here, don't you? I like coming to work. I like the way this church feels. I like the possibilities we're playing with. Hec, I like the fact that we're playing, period!

Emory Church is a precious community – precious to us and precious to God. Like most live organisms, this church has been through some very, very hard times. Will likely go through them again. But right now and for the foreseeable future, I see is this community reaping the benefits of its suffering – and there are benefits you know, from suffering. With suffering often comes the gifts of humility and compassion, of tenderness and perseverance, of a kind of lightness of being that comes from having survived. After a season of intense, and effective, I might add, activity aimed at the church's survival, we've come to a time, I believe, for the weary to relax, for the worried to relax, for the wary...to relax. Surely by now the truth has penetrated for us that this is *God's* church, that *God* is in charge here, that all will be well.

I want to tell you that my time with you has been a blessing to me. I shall never forget how very kind and supportive you were to me and my family last January around the death of my mother. Her birthday, incidentally, was last Friday. I still miss her very much. But the way this church held me and my sisters during those weeks around her passing will remain a memory of a lifetime.

You have also blessed me by your generous personal affirmations, by your warm welcome of my son, by the witness of your intense commitment to this church, by your

creativity under pressure, by your flexibility under stress, and by your general tolerance of my personal peculiarities.

I will miss you. I will miss worshipping in this beautiful space. I will miss the way God touches my heart through the joys and concerns you share. I will miss your hugs and your kindnesses and your community, my sense of belonging, here. But I leave feeling so proud of you, so well-loved by you, and so confident of this church's future that I won't worry for you...much. At least no more than any other mother, nurse, business woman and pastor who considers herself the center of the universe of all for whom she cares.

There ends the second of my two laundry lists, awkward in juxtaposition with the first, and almost as lengthy so, speaking of silly, I shall summarize the lists in two poems, the first of which is entitled "Our Summer Saints;" and the second, "Emory Church."

Our Summer Saints

Augustine, Hildegard, Therese of Lisieux,
Merton, Jerdan and Bill W., too.
Stories of faith, stories of sin,
stories of insight and God within.
The love of God through 'The Little Way,'
the place of doubt in faith's every day;
All-out commitment, a door opened wide -
but careful what might be on the other side.
Hit bottom, look up, take a day at a time,
or maybe just an hour; life can turn on a dime.
Saints aren't really saints, except when they are
You and I, we're a sainthood, when we stretch our hearts that far.
In fact, we're God's living sparks with a job to do -
So get with the program, Creation's waitin' on you!

Emory Church

You started out schlepping on a long, dark way

but you kept on praying 'til the light of day.
It was God's light in both shadow and brightness;
you started out heavy but now have more lightness.
If transitions are watersheds meant to inform,
you've been drenched quite enough to be fully reborn!
New staff and new missions and new programs of giving,
surely it's time to rejoin the land of the living.
With laughter and love and a new lightness of being,
with faith and with hope and a new way of seeing,
with God right in charge, the way is wide-open.
Pastors come and they go but here's to still hoping
that with the Holy Spirit planted deep in her heart
Emory Church will keep going like it did from the start:
a communion of saints that stumbles sometimes
but stays on the Path that Christ Jesus outlines.
So love one another and often forgive,
and love God with your whole heart as long as you live.
Be ardent of Spirit and serve our dear Lord,
and keep coming to worship even if you get bored.
Live peaceably with all, overcome evil with good,
and if you haven't yet put Emory church in your will,
remember, you should.

Laundry lists. Worse, Dr. Seuss-style, in iambic pentameter. Who can ever remember them? But what, after all, am I really trying to say to you except...I love you, God loves you, and if you want to know how to love God and me back, well, this is what it looks like.

To the glory of God. Amen.