

**BUILDING THE BELOVED COMMUNITY:  
IMAGINATION AND PRACTICE**

Romans 12:9-18

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How do you compare this moment in history to any other? It's easy to say, "The United States has never been more polarized than it is right now." But what about during the Vietnam War? What about during the Civil War?

It's tempting to say, "I can't imagine living in a more stressful period of time." But what about during the Industrial Revolution, when children worked long hours in dangerous factory conditions?

People in almost any other era would surely roll their eyes at some of our complaints when they see our modern conveniences. Yet indisputably, we are living in a time when both anxiety and despair are rampant.

One of the many differences between our era and previous eras is that we are, for the most part, living without role models. Because we have the ability to scrutinize every movement someone makes, and every word someone speaks or writes, we have lost our heroines and heroes. People weren't any better in the past, it's just that their mistakes were easier to hide.

So when we find someone in the public arena who seems to be able to navigate the constant attention yet maintain a sense of integrity and rise

above it all, we appreciate that person all the more. I'm sure no one here thinks that LeBron James is perfect. We know he has made mistakes, but we are grateful to him for his good qualities: his sense of philanthropy, his work ethic, the way he stands up for what he believes. He has given us hope.

And that is the function of role models. They are not meant to be people we worship, but rather people who lift our sights, people who remind us to believe that a better way of living is possible. That's how role models are described in the Bible, too. The heroes and heroines of the Bible are so flawed it's practically laughable, and that seems to be the point. They are people to whom we can relate, down-to-earth people not meant to be worshiped, but who nonetheless have qualities we can admire.

The Bible, then, goes one step further. The Bible gives us not just role model people, but role model communities. In the Hebrew Scriptures, we learn that Israel is chosen by God to be set apart, not set above, but set apart. God will use Israel as a test case, an example for others to follow. So God says to Israel, "Here are the rules to follow. These aren't given to you as punishment, they're given to you because I love you. I want you to live peaceably with one another. In order to do that, you will care for each other. Show hospitality to strangers, pay special attention to widows and

orphans because they are the most vulnerable. Don't steal each other's possessions. And so on." God wants to be able to say to other groups of people, "See what human life can look like at its best!" We know, of course, that Israel wasn't always at its best. Time and time again, its people fall away from the covenant. They forget God and the rules God has given them. They behave selfishly, violently. Yet still there are moments when we can look at them at their best and catch a glimpse of what life can be like.

In the New Testament, the church is set apart as a community based on the ideals Jesus lived and taught. In our passage for today, Paul describes the church's values this way. We are a community of people who believe in genuine love, in hating what is evil, holding on to what is good, loving one another with mutual affection, outdoing one another in showing honor. We are a community of people who are enthusiastic, generous, prayerful and hospitable.

Do we do these things all the time? Of course not. We're human. We fail and fall. But we have been given grace and forgiveness, and so we pick ourselves up, we set each other back on the path, and we try again.

Do you notice that this passage defines us not so much by what we believe as by what we do?

We are not set above. We are not better than anyone else, any other community or group of people. Rather, we are set apart. We are set apart to be role models, to be a role model community. Our task is to be a beacon of light, a source of hope.

One historian of the early church described its community this way: “There was an exuberant caring and sharing on the part of Christians that was unique in their era. The Christians’ deeds of love were so noble that the pagan world confessed in astonishment, ‘See how they love one another!’” By the year 250, Christians in Rome were caring for some 1500 needy people. In fact their generosity was so profuse that Ignatius could say that they were “leading in love”. They were sending supplies to many churches in every city. The church took seriously the call to care for the poor. If someone lost a job, the church was there. “But their joyful sharing was not confined to Christians...Every day the church here feeds 3,000 people. Besides this, the church daily helps provide food and clothes for prisoners, the hospitalized, pilgrims, cripples and others. When epidemics broke out in Carthage and Alexandria, Christians rushed to aid all in need...These Christians genuinely believed that God was the owner and giver of all good gifts. Their generosity was an imitation of God’s generosity. They were free

from anxiety because they knew that tomorrow was in God's hands. They lived in simplicity."

And from the Christian philosopher Aristides, writing in the year 125: "They walk in all humility and kindness, and falsehood is not found among them, and they love one another. They despise not the widow, and grieve not the orphan. If someone has, he shares with the one who has not. If they see a stranger, they bring him under their roof, and rejoice over him as if he were their own brother...if anyone is needy and poor, and if they don't have what they need, they fast two or three days in order to give the needy the food that is necessary." This is our heritage. These are our family stories.

Who needs expensive advertising in order to grow a church? If all churches were known to be leaders in love, wouldn't that speak for itself? Wouldn't all churches be bursting at the seams if the word spread that there was a community where everyone looked after each other, and where everyone inside the community was concerned about those outside the community?

This is what it means to be a role model community. Not that we claim to be perfect, not that we get it right all the time, but that we are aware that others are looking at us, desperate to believe that there is a community

where love matters, anxious to know that there is reason for hope in these despairing times.

I want to thank those of you who completed the church survey last month, and those of you who participated in the planning discussion in May. Over the summer, we are going to be compiling the results of the survey into a draft document, and then inviting your input again to look over and discuss the draft. The end result will be a 5-year mission and ministry plan, a way to articulate what we believe God is calling us to do and be in that period of time, in this particular place. The idea of goal-setting is to be intentional and thoughtful as we evaluate current programs and consider new programs. How can we best create God's beloved community? What are the specific signs of hope and light that we are called to offer? (No church can be everything, no church can meet every need.)

The Bible tells us that the first step towards transformation is imagination. Through prayer, through listening, through discerning conversations with one another, we begin to picture the kind of community God is calling us to be. Look at the language Jesus used in the parables and you begin to get a feel for this kind of imaginative language. It was impossible to describe the Kingdom of God, the Reign of God in rational practical language, so Jesus described it like this...imagine a shepherd who

values every single sheep so much that he leaves behind 99 sheep to find the one who is lost. That's what the Kingdom of God is like. Imagine a man who throws a party and invites all his friends, but none of them can come. They all send excuses. He doesn't want to waste the food, he wants others to enjoy the celebration, so he goes out into the streets and invites all of the people who never get invited to parties. Soon the banquet hall is full with a motley variety of street people, all singing and dancing and feasting. That's what the Reign of God looks like.

Becoming the beloved community God needs us to be in our time and place will require, first, an act of imagination. Like our ancestors in this very congregation, one of whom said, one day, "I wonder what would happen if we were to move, from our safe little location here on Lake Road to 17 acres on Electric Blvd.?" Or the one who said one day, "I wonder if we could raise more money for mission by opening a thrift shop, and giving away all of the profits?" They were leaps of imagination, first, leaps of faith into the risky unknown, but where would we be now without them?

The first step is to imagine, and the second step is to practice. We can write a plan, we can raise money, but what makes us a Christian community is the way we practice our faith, in small ways and large ways, hour by hour, day by day, season by season, year after year.

We build our community from the inside when we get to know one another, learning one another's names, listening to one another's stories, visiting one another in the hospital, sending cards, noticing when someone is missing, offering support, creating networks of caring. And then, from that strong foundation, we reach out to the community around us, extending an extravagant welcome to all who aren't here, inviting people to join us, warmly welcoming anyone who comes into our doors, considering the needs of our community and what we are capable of doing to meet them.

In order to maintain a healthy democracy, it's essential that people participate by staying informed, asking questions, supporting a free press, voting, and expressing both approval and disapproval.

In order to maintain a healthy church, it's essential that people participate in much the same way: ask questions, express opinions, pray, worship, give, speak the truth in love, dream, and also this. Love. Be leaders in love.

The survival of our institutions is not guaranteed. Their future depends on our willingness to remain committed and vigilant, putting our beliefs into practice.