

RECONNECT WITH ONE OTHER

Romans 12: 9-18

Kelly Boyte Brill
Avon Lake UCC
25 September 2022

At the University of Alabama, the competition to be admitted into a sorority is fierce. The young women going through rush visit various sorority houses, hoping for an invitation. They are called “p.n.m.’s”, potential new members. According to one reporter, the p.n.m.’s dress so similarly you’d almost think there was a uniform. They want to look just right, but in the heat and humidity of Alabama in August, even if you start the day with good hair, that good hair day doesn’t last. So many of the women carry bags, so-called “rush bags,” which hold their battery-operated hand-held fans. Before they enter a sorority house, they’ll whoosh up their hair and spruce up their makeup. If a student who has her heart set on a certain sorority doesn’t get in, she may be devastated, humiliated. The process is stressful.

We haven’t all been through a selection process quite like that, but we all know something about what it feels like to be chosen, or not.

A few years ago, I received a phone call from a church member, the mother of a ninth grade boy. This boy had played baseball from the time he could walk. He’d been on travel teams, he’d played year-round indoors, he’d received private instruction. But he didn’t make the 9th grade team. Something about the coach, or the way the freshman acted during try-outs. Neither she nor the boy’s dad nor the boy himself had ever considered the fact that he might not make the team when he got to the high school. It became a family crisis.

Do you have the right look, the right moves? How’s your grade point average? Will you make it into the college you hope to attend?

The pressure to look a certain way or act a certain way doesn't end in adolescence. Throughout our lives, we are aware of how we measure up. We compare ourselves to others. The questions continue.

Am I really performing well at work? Or am I going to be the next one who's let go?

Is my marriage ok? When I look on Facebook, everyone else's marriage seems to be happier.

Am I a good enough parent? Why do my kids look like a hot mess when everyone else's seem so put together?

Many of us live with self-doubt, with nagging feelings that we're just not okay.

Like so many things in life, there's a pendulum that sometimes swings too far one way and then comes back. I wonder if perhaps our focus on self-improvement has become excessive. We read article after article, we click on links, we watch Youtube videos. In bookstores, one of the biggest sections contains books on self-help and improvement. Everyone has advice on how we can have healthier-looking age-proof skin, or six-pack abs, or recession-proof investments, or the perfect Halloween decorations. Taken at face value, self-improvement is certainly not bad. But anyone who has tried self-improvement knows that it's a short slide from "you *can* get better" to "you *must* get better" to "you *must never stop* getting better." The goalposts keep retreating in front of us, so that better is never good enough. The present self remains inadequate, always in need of more coaching, more products, better maintenance.

A teacher friend confided recently that the parents she hears from most are not those of her B and C students but those of her A- students. They are the ones spending an inordinate amount of time wondering how their child can start making solid A's.

We are under pressure to show that we know how to lead the perfect life. This is what happens when the pendulum swings too far. Once you accept that you can improve yourself, you have only yourself to blame if you don't. The result is that we live with feelings of shame and we avoid people who appear to have it all together.

This idea that we are projects in need of improvement fosters loneliness, resentment, and jealousy. It isolates us from each other. Sometimes, in self-defense, we then resort to tearing others down.

Then add in the effect of social media. When we assume that the perfect lives we see displayed on Instagram are actually attainable, we become doubly aware of how short we fall in comparison. Some people fall into despair. More than a few researchers have linked the rise of suicide in the United States to a failure to meet the sky-high expectations we set for ourselves, whether that be our bodies or our bank accounts or our children.

A young woman named Ashley woke up one Saturday morning and realized, "This is the day." The first day of court-mandated group therapy. For some reason, the court had recommended group therapy for her instead of AA, but the groups turned out to be very similar. Ashley is a self-described actor-screenwriter-activist. She has tattoos and piercings. And she had hit rock bottom. A DUI, license taken away, picture in the paper, court fees she couldn't afford. Now she would sit in a dingy room once a week with a group in which she was one of few women and by far the youngest. She went begrudgingly, because she had to. She was certain she had nothing in common with the rest of the group, mostly older men.

After two months, Ashley said that, to her surprise and delight, the group had changed her life. For the better. Every person around the room had stories to share. The more she heard, the less alone she felt. "I don't think I've ever felt so understood," she told me. "What

we have in common is a wake of broken promises and bad decisions. I don't have to edit my story or worry about impressing them. It's *such* a relief. I look forward to it every week."

Could it be that the secret to true community is the realization that what all of us have in common is our experience of weakness and vulnerability? Could it be that the antidote to feelings of loneliness is realizing that the shared human experience is one of failures and mistakes at least as much, if not more than, our triumphs and successes? What if we were able to be more honest with one another? What if we were more humble?

Beau read a passage from Romans earlier; here it is again - this time from the Message version of the Bible:

Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle. Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant. Don't quit in hard times; pray all the harder. Help needy Christians; be inventive in hospitality. Bless your enemies; no cursing under your breath. Laugh with your happy friends when they're happy; share tears when they're down. Get along with each other; don't be stuck-up. Make friends with nobodies; don't be the great somebody. Don't hit back; discover beauty in everyone. If you've got it in you, get along with everybody. Don't insist on getting even; that's not for you to do. "I'll do the judging," says God. "I'll take care of it."

Paul is calling us to a shared life that is real. It doesn't mean we give up all efforts towards self-improvement; of course not. We can continue to try to become the best leaders, citizens, family members and friends that we can. But we start NOT by assuming that we must always be better but by remembering this. We are already accepted. We are already ok. We are already loved unconditionally.

Friday afternoon I attended the installation service for our new UCC conference minister, Dave Long-Higgins. Some of you may remember that he preached here this past summer. As part of his benediction, he said to each of us in the room, "Your first name is beloved."

We may choose to improve, but we don't have to prove ourselves to God. We are already beloved in God's eyes. We are already good enough. We are always enough in God's eyes.

When we accept that good news, when we really take that in, then we feel more secure, less anxious. When we feel okay about who we are, then we can befriend one another, knowing that none of us is perfect, and that most of us are trying our best every day.

Here's where the best kind of community begins. I recognize my own strengths and weaknesses, I recognize yours, and I realize that we need one another. That we're better together.

Everyone has a blind spot that another person may be able to fill. Perhaps creativity comes easily to your coworker but organization does not. Perhaps your brother has artistic ability but can't do math to save his life. Perhaps your child is sensitive to what others are feeling but finds it arduous to make a decision. This is where collaboration and teamwork can be effective. We need other people. The Bible describes a healthy community as one body with many parts.

An interviewer once asked famed anthropologist Margaret Mead what she considered to be the earliest sign of human civilization. The interviewer was waiting for her to talk about a spearhead she'd found on some remote island or some kind of primitive plow. But Mead's

answer was: “The earliest sign of human civilization is a 15,000-year-old femur that had been visibly broken and healed.”

She explained. It takes roughly six weeks for a broken femur to heal, which means during that time, the wounded human would not have been able to work, feed or protect themselves. Others would have had to care for them while they were infirm. This support, according to Mead, does not occur in the rest of the animal kingdom, nor was it a feature of pre-human hominids. Our way of coping with weakness, as much as our ingenious technologies and arts, is what sets us apart as a species.

Helping one another makes us human. Receiving help when we need it connects us to other people.

How can we help each other build a church community where we accept one another in all of our imperfections, reach out to one another in genuine concern, and extend God’s gracious unconditional love to so many who need to hear this unbelievably good news: “You are beloved.”

"In this sermon, I quote heavily and rely extensively on this book I'm currently reading: [Low Anthropology](#) by David Zahl"