

*The Hermeneutic of Generosity, aka “The H of G”*

Romans 12:9-21

Whitefish UMC

August 28, 2011

- † It’s been three weeks since senior high camp ended, but on Facebook, campers still post comments about how much they miss one another and long for the beloved community they experience at camp. What is it, then, about that community that holds them so? And what does it have to do with us?
- † Before campers even arrive, they are asked to sign a covenant that governs their corporate behavior toward one another. And when family groups begin processing the events of each day, the first thing they do is form and adopt a covenant for how they will relate to both youth and adults.
- † Some components of the covenant are obvious: keep confidentiality, respect each other, listen attentively, be positive and loving in comments—to name a few. When we’re working on assembling the covenant, it’s easy to agree to keep to these principles. It’s when emotions run high, when the going gets tough, that it’s more difficult. When the covenants are upheld, then the tears come and anger bubbles up.
- † The verses in Paul’s letter to the Roman Christians could function brilliantly as a group covenant for people of faith almost anywhere. Like the covenant that senior high campers compose, Paul’s covenant contains what one writer calls “a mix of ‘the usual suspects’ and suggestions that promise to stretch

individuals and faith communities beyond what might seem logical, practical, or even ‘good’ to them.

- † Few church members would argue with Paul’s exhortations to hate evil, persevere in prayer, or to celebrate with the joyful and weep with the grieving. The more complicated parts of this text concern our relationships with those we find hard to love. To say that our core values not only include extending hospitality to strangers but blessing, feeding, and refusing to take vengeance on enemies will put a strain on some of us within our churches, let alone on relationships with those outside the faith community. This passage [she writes] is not a greeting card slogan but a call to costly discipleship.
- † Above all, overarching all the elements of the covenant, is Paul’s urging to hold fast to love and to what is good. Well of course—sure—that’s what we each ought to do, we think. But is it really possible?
- † Peter Marty recounts two stories following the events of the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta. He says, “Few of us remember the names of athletes who made their mark during those weeks of the '96 summer games. We can't recall the records that were set in different Olympic competitions that year, but we do remember the tragic incident involving a pipe bomb in Centennial Park, the one that killed one person and injured more than 100 others. Eric Rudolph, who spent five years hiding in the North Carolina wilderness before his apprehension, was responsible for the crime. He is currently serving more than four consecutive life terms for his role in both this Olympic bombing and several other women's health clinic bombings. We will not be seeing him anytime soon.
- † At his sentencing hearing, Eric Rudolph apologized for maiming innocent people. "I would do anything to take back that night," he said, this before

two dozen victims and their families, all of whom had a range of different reactions to this man and his words.

- † The reason for noting Eric Rudolph's day in court has to do with the amazing response of two of his victims. The first was that of Fallon Stubbs, the 23-year-old daughter of Alice Hawthorne who was killed by the Olympic Park bomb. Ms. Stubbs, who was wounded by shrapnel from this bomb, offered Mr. Rudolph forgiveness. "Because of you," she said, I have become a tolerant person. Not for you, but for me, I forgive you. I look at you. I love you ... and if I cry," she added, "it's not for me. It's not for my mother. It's not for my father. It's [tears] for you."
- † Listen also to Memrie Creswell's story: She is a 37-year-old who was injured by Rudolph's bombing at the Otherside Lounge, a gay club in the Atlanta area. Said Ms. Creswell to reporters after the sentencing hearing, "He rolled his eyes when I said that I'm going to trump his evilness with love for the rest of my days."
- † Dr. Marty continues: "Now I don't know where these women came up with the courage to speak these thoughts, or with the faith to embody these convictions. Maybe their courage and faith came to them as *gifts* of God, which is often how courage and faith seem to show up; they arrive wrapped up like gifts sent from heaven. Or maybe each of these women own well-worn Bibles, and they have read them thoroughly enough to be well acquainted with the 12th chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans. I'm not sure. Either way, though, their words are powerful for one simple reason: They fly in the face of the human temptation to retaliate."
- † Who hasn't been smacked in the cheek, assaulted with a nasty comment, or run over by a cheap shot ... and NOT been tempted to exact some kind of revenge? Even the sweetest and gentlest of people have been known to turn

ferocious if they run up against some serious pain or anguish caused by another person's cruelty. If it can happen on the playground among first graders--which happens every day of the week--it can certainly happen among adults who have a special knack for rationalizing behaviors. Fighting back and responding in-kind seem to be basic human impulses when we are mistreated.

- † Most of us have a strong built-in sense of justice--at least, we know when we have been the victim of some injustice. So when we have the chance to implement a little justice of our own, any commitment to love we have can sail right out the window. Mind you, it's our own version of justice that we like to execute, and it often involves a pretty subjective application--one that's based on however we may be feeling at the moment.
- † But here is where we would be wise to loosen our grip on assuming that we know or understand perfect justice. Only God knows such things. And a bit more modesty on our part would go a long way toward recognizing God's far greater nose for justice. And then when we walk through life by faith, we would know to tread more sensitively and to walk more tenderly.
- † Maybe you've used the expression before or had it used on you, "I have my scruples and I'm going to stand on them." We rely on that phrase when we're getting ready to stand against someone. "Hey, I've got my scruple!" Most of us assume "scruples" here to mean "principles." To be scrupulous, we reason, is to be concerned with what is honest and right. "I am going to do what is honest and right and nothing less." But a scruple is really a sharp stone. You can look it up in the dictionary. The phrase "to stand on your scruples" comes from the idea of being bothered by the nuisance of a small sharp stone in your shoe.

- † That small stone in your shoe may feel problematic, but you stand there anyway. You stand there faithfully. "Standing on your scruples" means to stand firm. It implies--because of that little stone--that we are going to stand with sensitivity or with tender feet. Jesus teaches a kind of walk through life that involves tender feet and sensitivity ... not just a stubborn tromp believing that we are always right. Read the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew sometime--all three chapters--and you'll see Jesus' tendency to encourage tender-footed walking.”
- † Well as someone for whom injustice (personal or corporate) is definitely a jagged rock in my shoe, Peter Marty’s words cause me to take off my shoes and shake out that rock. So this year as I celebrate my birthday, I want to adopt what Paul’s core values embody: a little phrase used by Dr. Paul Farmer as profiled in Tracy Kidder’s book *Mountains Beyond Mountains*.
- † Paul Farmer travels the world establishing clinics to treat chronic diseases like tuberculosis in areas of severe poverty and inadequate health care. He is most noted now for his service in Haiti. This is a man who’s on the faculty at Harvard—he could be making a lot of money—but instead he’s living in a hut in Haiti treating tuberculosis and AIDS. Sometimes he walks for hours just to see a single patient, and he does this out of faith.
- † Farmer uses a phrase I really like, “the hermeneutics of generosity” or the “H of G”—hermeneutics just means a way of thinking and seeing—and the key is to apply this way of thinking to every ordinary situation in our lives. Yes, we should volunteer and yes, we should help in the obvious, corporeal ways, but service is more than that, too. It’s an attitude, an orientation. Every moment presents us with an opportunity to serve, and not just those who are physically, economically poor. There’s emotional poverty, too. Intellectual poverty.

- † Maybe someone doesn't show up for an appointment and you think, she doesn't care, she's blowing me off. To apply the hermeneutics of generosity is to stop and think, no, maybe she's got a problem, maybe it's not her fault. Maybe someone you know has a big success and you feel the usual stab of jealousy when you hear about it. To apply the hermeneutics of generosity is to stop and think and very consciously, very deliberately say no, this is good. It's to actively desire the best for others.
- † A lay Roman Catholic deacon who teaches at Oregon State University says, "Not that even this is easy, of course. It's terrifically hard, it's always hard. Maybe you have to stand up to someone, maybe you have to speak the truth to power, maybe you have to say something that's really difficult to say, and it makes people mad and gets you in trouble. But that can be a form of service, too--service to the truth, service to others.
- † The hermeneutics of generosity often leads to tension and conflict and in fact it always does. "We're not called to be successful," Mother Teresa said, "we're called to be faithful," and we have to be faithful even in the face of the enormity of our problems and the depth of our sins. In this sense any form of service can be a very daunting, a very trying thing. There are mountains beyond mountains. There's no end to the work that needs to be done, no one can ever really succeed at it, ever really conquer it, and to serve means to accept that and to learn to live with that. To serve is to live with what Farmer calls "the long defeat," as Jesus did in his suffering, on the cross."
- † But how is it possible to live this way, really? I like what pastor and author Barbara Brown Taylor says: "The only way to conquer evil is to absorb it. Take it into yourself and disarm it. Neutralize its acids. Serve as a charcoal

filter for its smog. Suck it up, put a straitjacket on it and turn it over to God, so that when you breathe out again the air is pure."

- † So what about it, beloved community of Whitefish United Methodist Church? Are we willing to make Paul's covenant our own, not just in our personal lives but in this church? If we did, and if we really lived it, would we be posting comments on Facebook and on the phone about how we love one another and miss each other when we're gone?
- † Don't wait for YOUR birthday to begin living "The H of G—the hermeneutic of generosity." Amen.

Sources:

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Tracy Kidder, Mountains Beyond Mountains. 2004.