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Year A
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*Blessed Lord, who caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning:
Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever
hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.*

LOVE, HATE, LIVE PEACEABLY

ROMANS 12:9-21

Rumor has it the University of Alabama has a football team. Not just a team, but a tradition complete with rejoicing and weeping, a tradition that produces championships (though not since 1992, but who among the Crimson Tide faithful has noticed...only everybody). College football in the Deep South functions as a religion, and Tuscaloosa is no different. Solomon in this tradition is affectionately known as Bear, and the temple named in his honor stands as tall during the off-season as it does after the games begin (and thanks be to God that the faithful need somewhere to park while they observe this Sabbath). In this tradition, the liturgical colors are crimson, white and hounds-tooth. Relics---anything that the Zeus-like Bryant ever brushed up against---are gathered and maintained in a museum. In an age of satellite dishes and cable television, a pilgrimage is not required. CBS, ABC or ESPN bring the Tide (and whatever team is being sacrificed) to us. Now that the wait is over, now that I have been here for the beginning of football season, now that the Tide has beaten Clemson and heightened the expectations of those who remember the glory years, I am increasingly convinced: (1) that when this civilization is excavated, anthropologists will ask, "Why did they worship hounds-tooth? Was the game that defined this people checkers or chess?; and (2) that if we do not appreciate---or at least have a sense of humor about---college football, we may become culturally irrelevant, labeled "out of touch" or even worse, "cultured despisers."

Remember Paul's imperatives in the first half of Romans 12: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds." Be humble. Recognize and value differences; and even though you are not to conform to this world, put yourselves out there by ministering, teaching, encouraging, giving, leading and practicing compassion. Humility is not achieved in isolation. God gives that to us through knowledge and experience, by trial and error (mostly error). It is impossible to recognize and value differences without experiencing them hand-to-hand and face-to-face. As more than one person has said to me about UPC, "I know that church is supposed to be multicultural. I know that church is called to embrace *all* people. Forget about race and class and who a person is compelled to love. I know all of this in theory, but until I came here I had not experienced this." This is sad: not that one experiences this here; but that it is so difficult to experience elsewhere. If one does not experience such radical and life-giving love in the church, how is he or she going to practice it in the world?

The Gospel of Jesus Christ starts somewhere. In the beginning, God says, "Let there be light," and there was light, more light than the world had ever known, at least until Mary and Joseph end up in a stable (because all of the hotels were booked; apparently, Bethlehem's football team had a home game after beating a nationally-ranked opponent the week before). With this humble beginning, the history of God's grace starts to be rewritten, and our faith---the faith that God gives to us---is being pioneered and perfected before God's Spirit ever leads us to a baptismal font. The warmth that emanates from a congregation when a baby is baptized is incredible. Maybe this is because the innocence of a child appeals to the most idealistic and/or safest places in our faith community and in us. Or maybe because when either one of the sacraments is celebrated, we are experiencing grace in its purest form.

Grace is pure; human beings are not, and this is where Paul begins this lecture to the church in Rome. Let your love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good. Remember: He has just

lectured the church on being members of the same body. Now he is setting up this dichotomy between loving and hating (perhaps this is related to not conforming but being transformed). Still, the language is jarring. Let your love be genuine? Roll Tide! Hate what is evil? At least for four quarters...as a Florida State alum, the catechism included the cheer, "It's great to hate the Florida Gators; it's great to hate the Florida Gators." But, in truth, the language of "hate" should not be taken lightly. You know this if you have ever felt hated, and, deep down, you know this if you have ever hated. Hatred smolders in the beginning, but un-tempered, it becomes a consuming fire of judgment not only for the person who is hated, but also for the person who hates.

Paul would have failed at least one of the preaching courses that I had in seminary, because the objective was to preach without imperatives. Preaching without imperatives is difficult to do, because telling others what to do and then saying "thus says the Lord" is as enticing as a pomegranate dangling from a tree of knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden. The function of preaching, as Reformed theologian Karl Barth suggests, is to point, to point to God's grace in Jesus Christ and to trust God to be God in the lives of the parishioners whom God gathers together to worship Sunday after Sunday. The obvious thing to say here is that I am not Paul, and Paul is writing to a different people, in a different place, at a different time, and yet this is the Gospel of the Lord: "Let your love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection (but be careful how you apply this one); outdo one another in showing honor."

Outdo one another? Is Paul saying, "Dear Christians, be competitive?" But compete with whom: ourselves or each other? The Olympics, which disrupted sleep patterns throughout the world, are not that far behind us. Meanwhile, here in the United States, God has gathered us to worship on the only Sunday between the Democratic and Republican National Conventions. Even though the Olympic Games are supposed to promote goodwill between nations, more often than not, they are politicized (who will or will not participate and what about Beijing). As athletes gather together as an act of unity,

one of the primary objectives is to stand on the highest platform, to listen to one's national anthem blasting through stadium speakers and to feel the weight of a gold medal draped around one's neck. The political process in the United States is just as competitive. Ask Will Campbell, the activist/minister who inspired Doug Marlette's *Kudzo* cartoon, who says, "I watch politics like I watch sports: I have a favorite team." Unfortunately, politics may have become too much of a dog-and-pony (or donkey-and-elephant) show. Nobody is lagging in zeal. Everybody is ardent in Spirit. But who is serving the Lord? Who is rejoicing in hope? Who has been patient in suffering? How shall we, as the church, persevere in prayer?

The imperatives keep coming: love; hate; hold fast; outdo; do not lag; be ardent; serve; rejoice; be patient; persevere; contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. When I first revisited this Scripture, I thought, "Contribute to the needs of the saints? What about the needs of sinners (self-interest has a way of always creeping in)?" Then I realized that Paul juxtaposes saints and strangers (as opposed to saints and sinners). Maybe those we vilify as "sinners" are merely strangers, people we have not yet come to know, and if we came to know them, we would come to recognize them as saints. Maybe this is why Paul's next series of injunctions begins, "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony...do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are (and) remember what is noble in the sight of all." No, I do not think that Paul is recommending a lowest-common-denominator Christianity. He repeats himself by saying, "be humble;" and he understands that humility often comes from the friction between human beings. God smoothes the most abrasive among us by having us rub up against each other again and again.

Live in harmony. Live peaceably. This is difficult to conceive, much less achieve, and yet this is the ideal. This is God's prayer, God's plan, for the church and the world. If you have doubts about pursuing such a dream, relax. Take a deep breath; now exhale. Paul doubts, too. There is a big "if" on

which this Scripture pivots: “*If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.*” Paul is unsure that it will happen, and yet he recognizes that each and every one of us is responsible for living peaceably with ourselves and with our neighbors and that we are not called to micro-manage the life of another person, another body or another nation. Still, there is something about Paul’s conclusion that feels passive-aggressive. Notice the next “*if*” statements: “*If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads. Do not overcome by evil, but overcome with good.*” What is Paul’s motivation for doing good: to heap burning coals on his opponents’ heads? No...at least I hope not! It is about creating space for God to do what God does, which, in some cases, is to judge. “Vengeance is mine,” says the Lord: not the state of Alabama or the United States of America; not the Presbyterian Church or the World Council of Churches but the God who created you, the God who created me and the God who created the most despicable person who comes to mind when I say this.

An observation, then an appeal: The pronouns in this section of Paul’s letter to the Romans change. In the beginning, Paul writes abstractly. The subjects that he is discussing are hate and love. Then suddenly, *what* statements become *who* statements. “Let love be genuine; hate what is evil” becomes bless those *who* persecute you. Rejoice with those *who rejoice*, weep with those *who* weep. Let God’s grace fill this place. Let God’s love become incarnate in you. In Jesus Christ, God became flesh and dwelt among us. God still dwells among us. God is much, much more than a religious ideal or a political platform. Our life together is more complex and invigorating than a sporting event. Our faith in Jesus Christ is nothing less than gift that calls us to be more than we can ever ask or imagine, and I pray that that will not stop us from asking or imagining, because in so doing, we are further transformed into the body of Christ, a body that gives glory to God now and forever. Amen.