

## *Staying Home*

18th Sunday after Pentecost – October 3, 2004

### Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passage (NRSV)

Romans 8:31,38-39;12:9-18

<sup>31</sup>What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? . . . <sup>38</sup>For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup>nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

<sup>9</sup>Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; <sup>10</sup>love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. <sup>11</sup>Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. <sup>12</sup>Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. <sup>13</sup>Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

<sup>14</sup>Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. <sup>15</sup>Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. <sup>16</sup>Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. <sup>17</sup>Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. <sup>18</sup>If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

*Today, we conclude this four-week series on the reality of loneliness and the joy of coming home to God: our own return from exile.*

*After the party's over*

Last week, we looked at Jesus' parable about a father and his two sons. You'll recall that as the story goes, after the once-wild but now-repentant younger son returns home, the father is so free from recrimination and so filled with joy that he throws a huge Welcome Home party, sparing no expense. Indeed, the celebration is so expansive and the father's forgiveness so abundant that the older son is resentful. After all, no one ever threw a party for him! Nonetheless, the father embraces the older son, urging him to share in the joy and join the party. And there the parable ends.

Have you ever wondered what might have happened the day after the party ended ~ and the next day, the next week, the next month? Did the older brother really come around or did he nurse his resentment of his brother? Did the younger son's repentance prove to be truly genuine or did he fall back into his old ways? Was the home a tense place or a household marked by joy? As we consider our own homecoming, our own return from loneliness to the love of God from which we cannot be separated,<sup>1</sup> we might reflect upon the sort of "home life" to which God calls us.

#### The Letter to the Romans

Romans, written in 55-56AD, is a letter from the apostle Paul to the house churches in Rome. About five years earlier, there had been trouble in the Jewish quarters of Rome. Suetonius, a Roman biographer, wrote that the trouble had something to do with a person referred to as *Chrestus*. Whether the disturbances had anything to do with the followers of Jesus, the result was that Emperor Claudius expelled all the Jews from Rome. According to Roman law, such edicts died with the Emperor. Thus, after Claudius' death in 54AD, Jews began to return to Rome, including the Jewish Christians.<sup>1</sup> But there was a problem.

Jewish Christians returned to Rome only to discover that the Gentile (non-Jewish) Christians were running the show! In the early decades of Christianity, tensions were always high between the Jewish followers of Jesus and the Gentile followers. We can be sure that the Jewish Christians' five year absence only made the tension that much worse when they returned.

In this letter, Paul urges harmony and unity, reminding those Christians who had been Gentiles that the Jews were the root of the Christian tree and reminding the Jews who were now Christians that God's salvation is for all people. There is one people of God and one faith.

1. In the eyes of Rome, a Jew was a Jew whether she was a follower of Jesus or not. For example, Paul would have been expelled from Rome in 49AD even though he was an apostle of Christ; Paul was Jewish.

<sup>1</sup>Romans 8:39 points us to one certainty about the epilogue to Jesus' parable. Nothing ever did or ever would separate the sons from their father's love.

### Within the home

Paul saw his mission as traveling throughout the Roman Empire founding colonies of the new human race created in Christ. As he wrote the Christians in Corinth, “If anyone is in Christ – new creation! – the old has gone, the new has come” (2 Cor 5:17). In today’s passage from Romans 12, Paul lays out the basics of life in such a new colony. These should not be read as rules or requirements, for that misses the point. These basics are no more and no less than the consequences of having been reborn in Christ. Paul is not urging them to be something that they are not, he is urging them to remember who they are – and act like it! And as in all of Paul, his focus is on building up the community, not simply the pursuit of individual holiness.

Verses 9-13 speak to life *within* the community and there are a few points that we might draw out. For Paul, love is simply a given. Love defines the center of the Christian life. Love is the defining characteristic of the Christian community. Love loathes evil (“hate” is too weak a word for the

#### Theology and Ethics

A frequent mistake that Christians often make when they come to Paul’s letters is to try to divide them into sections on Paul’s “theology” and Paul’s “ethics.” The letter to the Romans is a good example. It is tempting to divide Romans into a large section of doctrine (chapters 1-11) and a closing section on ethics (chapters 12-16).

However, this misreads Paul. Neither for Paul, nor for us, can theology and ethics be neatly pulled apart. What we believe about God and the nature of reality (our doctrine) and how we live (our ethics) is woven together like a piece of cloth. When we work too hard to pull doctrine and ethics apart, we inevitably over-emphasize one at the expense of the other – or worse, imagine that they have nothing to do with each other. We can see this in something as well-known as the Ten Commandments.

In the January 19, 2003 Background Study, I wrote about the “Second Tablet Project.” The project describes the attempt to separate the first four commandments about loving God (the first tablet) from the last six commandments about loving our neighbor (the second tablet).

But Paul urges us to understand that any attempt to live by the second tablet while ignoring the first – a second tablet project – is doomed to failure. We are made in God’s image. As the Westminster Confession puts it, we are “made to know God and enjoy him forever.” When we seek to build a good life or to do the right thing, we have to begin with God, God’s way, and the very reason why we are here in the first place!

Hence, in the opening sentence of his letter, Paul proclaims the gospel of Jesus Christ our Lord, “through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name . . .” (1:5) – *the obedience of faith*.

Greek). Love is mutual. Love respects<sup>2</sup> (v. 11). And as always for Paul, love is practical, never merely feelings. Love is energetic. Love glows like a fire. Love serves in all things (v. 12). Love rejoices and is patient. Love takes the trouble to pray with meaning and sincerity. Love is always ready to meet the needs of others (v. 13).

#### Outside the home

Verses 14-18 turn our attention outward. Paul, Peter, and the apostles all had much to say about the Christians’ relationships with outsiders (for example, see 1 Peter 2:11-17) and some of it is pretty surprising. To appreciate this, we need to remember that even though Christians weren’t always actively persecuted, they were always seen as peculiar, odd, and somewhat threatening. So, it is a bold statement Paul makes when he says “Bless those who persecute you” (v. 14). We are to rejoice with the outsiders and weep with them. We are to embrace the marginalized, not imagining that we are inherently superior to or wiser than others. And for Paul as for Christ, vengeance is simply not an option for Christians. There can be no eye for an eye (Matthew 5:39); we are not to repay evil with evil. As the passage goes on past verse 18, Paul urges the Christians not to give into the natural, though evil, impulses of revenge. Instead, Paul tells them that they are to overcome evil with goodness (v. 21). What an enormous challenge that Paul lays out in a few phrases.

So what are we to make of the father’s home with his two sons? It would be a home of love, peace, kindness, and sacrifice. The younger son would wake each day desiring to walk in his father’s ways. The older son would set aside any resentment and rejoice that the family had been restored. It would be a home that we might call a colony of heaven.

<sup>2</sup>Hearing echoes of 1 Corinthians 13 is appropriate here! You might also check out Galatians 5:22.

## Daily Bible Readings

*(more from Paul's letter to the Romans)*

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<b>Day 1 Romans 1:1-17 Paul's opening statement - God's gospel and God's righteousness</b>	<b>Day 2 Romans 3:21 - 4:25 God's faithfulness to the covenant</b>
<b>Day 3 Romans 6 Baptism and freedom</b>	<b>Day 4 Romans 9:30 - 10:21 God's covenant faithfulness revealed in the Messiah</b>
<b>Day 5 Romans 14 Judging and being judged</b>	<b>Weekly Prayer Concerns</b>

## Sermon Notes

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### October Book Recommendation: *Flannery O'Connor: Spiritual Writings*

This book is a change of pace from my usual recommendations. Flannery O'Connor was one of America's greatest 20th-Century writers. A southerner and a Christian, O'Connor wrote honest, direct novels and stories that explored the darkness and the hope in the human experience. She took pride in being what she termed a Christian Realist. A collection of her letters were published about fifteen years after her death in 1964. Portions of these letters, as well as some of her fiction writings, can be found in this introductory volume.

This is not so-called "Christian writing," in that Ms. O'Connor considered herself to be writing to a non-believing audience. But believers will find here much insight into the nature of God, life, and the salvation we all seek – and a lot of great writing!

Available at *Inspiration*, the St. Andrew bookstore

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. You might begin this week by returning to the parable of the father and his sons. As we saw last week, it is a story of homecoming, return from exile, and forgiveness of sins. How do you think things actually would have worked out in their home after the party was over? What if it was your own family? You might even share a few family stories about the difficulty of putting things right. Some families simply never can.
2. Though I didn't concentrate on it in this study, perhaps the ultimate answer to loneliness lies in Romans 8:39: nothing (yes, really ~ nothing) can "separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus." This is not some vague sentiment talking about some sort of unknowable supreme being or reality. No, Paul is specific here. We can never be separated from the love of the one true God, YHWH, who is revealed fully in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Yet, I suspect that many Christians find it difficult to be sustained by this promise, true though it may be, in all times and circumstances. Do you agree? Why do you think this is? What can we do to feel God's embrace when we are lonely and disconnected from others? What might we do to prepare ourselves for the times when we do not feel close to God? For the truth is that we might feel lonely and disconnected, but we are never truly alone – God is always with us.
3. Here is a simple question. What are we, St. Andrew, doing to ease the tragedy of loneliness?