

Sermon for August 30, 2020  
 22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)  
 Sermon Text: Romans 12: 9-21 and Matthew 16: 21-28  
 Sermon Title: *“Just keep swimming”* .....

**PRAYER OF INVOCATION: Holy God, we come this day to worship you and to give you all praise and glory. We are aware that your holiness and mystery is always surrounding us. Let us lay aside our daily tasks and listen for your voice. Give us wisdom to understand your call upon our lives and courage to follow your path. Amen.**

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: God of Mercy, your faithfulness to your covenant frees us to live together in the security of your powerful love. Amid all the changing words of our generation speak your eternal Word that does not change. Then may we response to your gracious promises by living in faith and obedience; through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.**

Some years ago, Judith Martin wrote the book: *“Miss Manners’ Guide to Excruciatingly Correct Behavior?”* Martin has written numerous books on etiquette and is considered a modern-day guru on the subject. She covers a variety of situations from the simple thank you note to funeral etiquette. For example, a thank you note must be sent immediately, not on a preprinted card or via email. It must begin with a “burst of enthusiasm,” and contain a flattering adjective describing the present received. The only excuse for declining to be a pallbearer is a *“plan to have one’s own funeral in the near future.”* Even young children must have rules. What is important enough to interrupt your mother’s Zoom conversation with friends? *“Mommy, the kitchen is full of smoke.”*

Our society seems to have suspended the need for thank you notes. I have given wedding gifts to colleagues that were never acknowledged. On the occasion of a person’s third marriage, I just sent a card. Some years ago, our son neglected to write a timely thank you note to a close friend for his wedding gift. After several gentle nudges from me, I finally threatened to write the note myself. He must have thought I wouldn’t do a very good job, because he promptly wrote the note explaining that he had been raised by wolves and didn’t understand all the rules of herd behavior.

Good rules make for good behavior, and they can come in handy. It was fun to imagine what might be included if a *“Miss Manners’ Guide”* was written for South Plains. *Dave, you can’t wear your motorcycle helmet in church or on Zoom, and flip flops must be approved by the facilities committee.* If you are in the sanctuary, don’t draw attention to yourself by singing louder than any six people in your row, or forgetting to mute yourself and drowning out Angela during the Doxology. If you interrupt someone during Zoom fellowship, it must have the importance of *“Mommy, the sanctuary is full of smoke.”* And when you speak to the pastor after worship, begin with a burst of enthusiasm and a flattering adjective. Otherwise, just slip out of the meeting.

In Romans, Paul is not writing an etiquette guide or a handbook for church government like the Presbyterian Book of Order, but he is telling us how to behave as the church. It's tempting to slink away from the challenge even before we begin, because Paul's suggestions are even more demanding than "*Miss Manners' Guide to Excruciatingly Correct Behavior.*" Listen to what Paul says: *Hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ....rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer; extend hospitality to strangers.* The list goes on. I don't know about you, but I'm feeling overwhelmed. Who could possibly behave this well?

The scripture lesson for today builds on the previous section in Romans, read last week, which calls upon believers in Christ not to be "*conformed to this world, but transformed.*" For Paul, the ethics of the Christian community begins and ends with love. In the first twelve chapters in Romans, Paul has been establishing his argument that salvation is based upon righteousness, that right relationship to God. Now he moves to explain how love from God impacts the daily life of believers. To be clear: Christians are not called to a high moral standard in order to be saved. That's a gift. Rather, Christians behave well because we are grateful for forgiveness of sin, and for our salvation. Our whole life becomes a thank-you note to God.

The writer Kristin Johnston Lagen says that she takes her theological insight wherever she can find it. And one place where she finds it is in the children's movie *Finding Nemo*. Dory, is a tang fish in the movie, who offers the following advice: *When life gets you down do you wanna know what you've gotta do? Just keep swimming. Just keep swimming. Just keep swimming, swimming, swimming. What do we do? We swim, swim.*"

I had never experienced an earthquake until a few years ago when I was sitting in a boardroom in Richmond with a number of other pastors and elders in the Presbytery. I froze. Fortunately, there was an elder there who knew what was happening, and she instructed us to get out of our chairs and to proceed quickly out of the building. Being Presbyterian, we did this decently and in order.

A friend of mine told me she was in a dressing room in her underwear when the earthquake rumbled, trying on clothes. When the room began to shake and the rumbling started, she had no idea that it was an earthquake. She thought the boiler was blowing up. When she peeked out of the dressing room, she saw that she was in the women's section all by herself; everyone else had fled. She was sure that she would be killed. So she decided to keep trying on clothes so that she would be well dressed when they found her body in the rubble. That's what I call "*just keeping on swimming.*" Dying in a new dress that you haven't paid for.

Now here's how Dory the fish's theology and my friend's perseverance under adverse conditions come in handy when we encounter Paul. If we take Paul's suggestions for ethical Christian behavior seriously, we have some choices to make. We can ignore them, because we seriously doubt that we can ever live into those behaviors. So Paul's

instructions become like Jesus' Sermon on the Mount – principles that are never attainable, but good poetry nevertheless. Second, we can use these instructions to beat ourselves up, because we are overcome with our own sinfulness. We can use Paul's list of expectations as a measuring stick against which we measure who's in and who's out in the Christian community. Or we can *keep on swimming*.

The Christian life takes patience and discipline. We keep on swimming, not because we are natural swimmers, but because God's grace and mercy are boundless, and the Holy Spirit continues to be at work in us, even when we fall down. Much of the time we're not going to be the kind of community that Paul calls us to be. But, we're going to continue to try, even when the waters threaten to drown us and the sea is full of sharks. With God's grace we are able to do the things, and to behave in ways that are impossible without God's presence.

Brett Younger from the McAfee School of Theology in Atlanta writes that the "measure of who we are as a congregation is how we love those who are left out." When God opens a door, the one who is standing on the other side doesn't always look like us. Sometimes they are too old, too poor, too dirty, too Hispanic, Black or foreign for us to be friends. But when we hear Paul's words in our hearts to "*Extend hospitality to strangers*" we are standing in the doorway of a moment when we have the privilege of becoming Christ's church. Hope emerges in the heart. And we find within this community a life that is hidden within the mysterious power of the risen Christ. Amen.