

**First United Methodist Church  
618 Eighth Street  
Columbus, Indiana 47201**

**Rev. Howard E. Boles  
September 3, 2023**

“What Church Looks Like”  
Text: Romans 12:9-21

Throughout the last month, we have been doing a sermon series with titles like, “This Is What Justice Looks Like” and “This Is What Reconciliation Looks Like.” Each week we have read a biblical story that highlights an important component of the Christian life. Along with justice and reconciliation, we talked about what compassion and faith look like in practical terms. If I had phrased today’s sermon in the form of a question, “What Does Church Look Like” the answer would have been found in each of the previous weeks. Church looks like a place where justice and reconciliation and compassion and faith are practiced. Not that we always get it right. But we are a people who strive to live up to these endeavors. So, let’s begin with a prayer:

**O Lord, speak to the heart of our uncertainties. Give us courage amid the sea of personal doubts. Confirm our faith where we feel inadequate to the daily tasks. And strengthen our timid attempts as we seek to live as your people. Amen.**

I don’t recall where I first came across this quote, but I have used it frequently. The quote says, “Marriage is like twirling a baton, turning handspings and eating with chopsticks. It looks easy until you try it.” There is a lot of wisdom there. Marriage, or any relationship for that matter, may look easy, but it takes a lot of work and effort.

I often ask couples in the premarital counseling sessions about their role models for marriage. Part of that is wanting to know that they have people they can identify who provide for them a healthy image of what marriage can be. Along with asking this question, I am hoping that they are reflecting on that role model and how to incorporate what that couple has into their own marriage. Some of the memorable responses are the couple who mentioned that their grandparents still hold hands when they walk together. Or the couple that said her parents always take the time to ask one another about their day and model a time of listening to one another.

Let me change that question just a bit this morning and ask, “Who are your role models for faithful living?” Who do you look up to and quietly say, “I wish my faith were like hers.” These are the people we admire, the folks we look up to, the people who are the epitome of what it means to be loving, kind, faithful. They are the saints that we aspire to be. And yet, often when asked, they will tell you all the ways in which they feel inadequate as a role model. Perhaps their humility is part of what makes them so admirable. But from their standpoint, they are continuing to learn and grow and mature in their faith, without the feeling that they have it all figured out.

In the reading for this morning, we get a glimpse of the kind of characteristics that we strive for in the Christian life. Paul lays it out quite clearly. Let your love be genuine. Love one another with mutual affection. Be hopeful. Be patient in suffering. Persevere in prayer. Extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you. Live peaceably with one another. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

It is a rather tidy list of things and seems quite complete. The truth is, I don't know why Paul needed to write anything further. Those words seem to sum it up quite well. Likewise, having said these things, I think it should be time to sing our last hymn and pronounce the benediction. Everything we need to know about the Christian life is summed up quite neatly in those words. And yet.... And yet, it is so easy to say those things and so difficult to practice them. It looks easy, it sounds easy, it seems so easy, until we try it.

I appreciate an essay by the great poet Maya Angelou. Writing candidly about matters of faith she said, "I'm startled and taken aback when people walk up to me to tell me they are Christians. My first response is 'Already.' It seems to me like a lifelong endeavor to try to live the life of a Christian. The idyllic condition cannot be arrived at and held on to eternally. It is in the search itself that one finds ecstasy."

Paul's words are not something we hear and attain in a moment's instance. They are a lifelong pursuit. I think this reading from Romans would make a great call and response. After each recommendation we would all respond with, "we will strive for this." Imagine what that might sound like. Let your love be genuine. *We will strive for this.* Love one another with mutual affection. *We will strive for this.* Extend hospitality toward strangers. *We will strive for this.* Each one of Paul's statements could be a starting point for our day reflecting upon the request and committing to strive for these lofty goals.

Melissa Pritchard has a short story entitled "Sweet Feed" written from the perspective of a cook in a prison. One of the man's jobs is to prepare the last meal for a convict prior to their execution. He takes his work seriously. Before preparing the meal, he asks the prisoner about the request and how he likes the meal to be served. One particular prisoner, A.B.C. Waller, Jr. has requested wild rabbit, black pepper gravy, buttermilk biscuits and blackberry pie.

The guards mock the cook's attention to detail, but Grady wants to do it right. This is, after all, the person's last meal. Grady prepares the meal as it was requested and along with it includes linen napkins and a bouquet of fresh flowers. When the tray comes back, it has been wiped clean by the biscuits and everything was consumed. Grady asks but the guards tell him that the prisoner said nothing about the meal. He takes the plate to rinse it and finds a note underneath. It reads in part, "It surely is better to step into the next world, tho I doubt there is one, on a full stomach. Rabbit was good, tho not the best. The best is first. P.S. flowers nice. Yours in all sincerity, A.B.C. Waller, Jr."

What makes that story so powerful to me is the dignity and humanity with which the cook treats this man. He treats the man in the way he would want to be treated. Somewhere in the margins of that story I hear St. Paul saying, "Let your love be genuine" and I hear myself responding, "I will strive for this."

This week, Diane and I had a brief time in Atlanta and visited the Center for Civil and Human Rights there. I have been to several civil rights museums around the country, but this one had an added intensity. One of the experiences was a lunch counter experience. It was intended to give the viewer a glimpse of what it was like to participate in the lunch counter sit-ins of the 1950's. As a refresher, there were lunch counters in the United States that refused to serve Black patrons. So groups began to schedule sit-ins where African Americans would sit at the counter and try to order. In most cases they were refused service.

Oftentimes, these protests turned violent. Patrons would shout at, spit on and physically assault those sitting at the counter. The protestors had made a vow to remain non-violent and received this abuse without responding in kind.

In this simulation at the Center for Civil and Human Rights, you sat at this counter and a pair of earphones were placed upon your head. You looked into a screen that projected images of what it was like to sit at those lunch counters. And then for a minute and a half, you are subjected to the kind of taunts and shouts faced by the protestors. There were voices shouting that sounded like they were right there behind you. The seats felt like they were being kicked and pulled. It lasted only 90 seconds, but it was profoundly moving. It left me with the question, how long would I be able to endure such abuse? Even knowing it was for a just cause, something I believed in strongly, could I sit there without responding to the anger? Could I do what those students did, even with the deepest conviction that it was the right thing to do?

And somewhere in my mind, after the 90 seconds had passed, I heard the voice of St. Paul whispering, "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them." And my timid voice falters as I say, "I will strive for this."

Harry was living in Toronto when he began corresponding with a woman he met through a pen pal. He fell in love and moved to rural Indiana to marry her. They worked a small farm near Evansville and raised two sons. Tragedy struck their lives when one of the sons was killed in a convenience store robbery. Not long thereafter, Harry's wife died unexpectedly as well. It was more than he could handle. Harry lost the farm and ended up broke and living on the streets.

There on the streets, Harry channeled his energy into making art. He painted on dumpsters and anything he could find. People noticed. Many didn't know his name, they only referred to him as the 'artist man.'" Harry liked that. Christ Church Cathedral in downtown Indianapolis asked him to paint a mural for the annual Homeless Memorial service held at the church. Other organizations began to commission him to make artistic pieces. Through that creativity and the support of the community, Harry was able to find a one-bedroom studio where he could live and paint. But he never really left the streets. He was constantly giving away his last few dollars or what little food he had to those who were homeless.

Harry died at the age of 69. A member called and asked if our church would be willing to host a memorial service for Harry. It was nearly 20 years ago to this date. The memorial service was one of the most diverse gatherings I have ever attended. There were dignitaries who were known to all. And there were homeless people who had heard about this service through word of mouth.

All of them assembled under the same roof remembering the kindness and creativity of Harry. His artwork was on display all around the church. The service included a time where anyone who wanted could speak. It was a beautiful remembrance of Harry's life. There were a lot of tears shed. There were a few stories that made everyone laugh.

It was unusual that after the service, people just stuck around. They continued to chat and share stories. They were comforting one another. They were caring for each other in the midst of their sorrow. Rich and poor, young and old, some of whom would return to their homes and some of whom would sleep on the street. But they were being the church. Rejoicing with those who rejoiced and weeping with those who were sad. Living in harmony with one another, not making any distinction among people, only seeing one another as fellow children of God.

This is what church looks like. It is about caring for all those around us. It is not about always getting it right. It is not about being perfect. But it is about making our goal one of loving each other and striving to live faithfully together.

It is kind of like twirling a baton, turning handsprings or eating with chopsticks. It looks easy until you try it. But with the words of St. Paul as a guide we continue to strive for that faithfulness together. Jean Vanier once said, "The church is not called to do extraordinary things; it is called to do ordinary things with extraordinary love." Let's start there.