

This lesson from Romans is one of those passages that I think serves as a good, gentle reminder for how to be in this world and how to be in the church, it may even have something to tell us about how to be church. Now there are far more exciting verses out there - passages about the kingdom of God; verses that offer us visions about everlasting abundance and justice. Even the passage from Exodus this morning takes place on a mountaintop with fire – way more of a draw – a passage that is truly life changing, history changing, salvation changing, freedom giving. And today’s gospel probably contains one of the most shocking challenges in all of Scripture “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me.” Huge. But this morning, rather than leaping up the mountain or taking on the bigger theological concepts, I want to pay attention to the small and remember the importance of the seemingly little things. Let’s be with Paul, in the church that is growing and working hard to be faithful in Rome.

Now in Rome at the time the church’s members were wrestling as much with each other as they were with larger theological concepts. The larger concepts were certainly a part of how they were defining themselves as a community of faith, but when it came right down to it, what they had was a bunch of people trying to be faithful to God with each other. They were working to integrate Jews and Gentiles or at least

trying to get to the point where they could sit side-by-side in the pew and eat side-by-side at the same table and serve on the same Committees and give common thanks and praise. That congregation was dealing with what society at large was saying about them and what leaders at large might do to them because of their new ways of believing and practicing their faith. In the day-to-day of it, the members of the church in Rome weren't really living on the mountaintop. They were working on the day-to-day of being in the church and in the world, in that time and in that place, asking how they were going to come together and move forward as community.

And so, Paul helped them find their focus and it wasn't primarily a big vision that he held up; instead he gave them the charge to pay attention to the little things with the promise that doing so would make them big and alive and full of faith: "Let love be genuine," he wrote as if it were obviously the way progress would be made. Don't be false with one another - Be real, be authentic. "Hate what is evil," he continued "and hold fast to what is good. . . love one another with mutual affection." Makes sense doesn't it? Not too hard . . . really. "Do not lag in zeal. Be ardent in spirit; serve the Lord." In other words, "Fire up! Enjoy this stuff -give it your all! Show'm what you've got!" "Extend hospitality to strangers." Just in case they got too full of yourselves, Paul reminded them that there were others out there who were hungry and had gifts to

offer too. “Bless those who persecute you,” he went on, which can’t really be classified as simple advice, and certainly seems counterintuitive but it was very clearly laid out! And then he concluded: “Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. Live in harmony and if it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” As if to say, “Because this does depend on you, each and every one of you.”

Which is maybe why Paul started small. This faith stuff, being church even was about Moses but it wasn’t only about Moses – It was also about each and every person who was there. Faith and being church were about the mountaintops in the Story but they were also about the flat ground on which the people gathered most of the time taking one step after the other while asking how they could be faithful not only when a burning bush was staring them in the face but when all that was staring them in their face was that other brother or sister in Christ who just as likely to contribute an annoying habit as they were to offer a new and stunning revelation about what it meant to be created in the image of God! This passage reminded that congregation and it reminds us too that while everything we do is about the capital “C” cross it’s also about the challenge of rubbing elbows in the day-to-day and so far as it depends on us, on each of us, we are to live peaceably with all.

And as we head into the program year here at Grace Church, officially Kicking Off next week, I can tell you that I have a heart full of mountaintops, a soul bursting with big dreams and a head that has a vicious and ongoing tendency to mull over the significant theological concepts of our time. I have a larger vision of a parish that is alive and growing and doing justice and helping to change the world for the better. I want us to be a burning bush in our little corner of Holland – offering light and giving voice to a challenging message of liberation and peace. And I want us to kneel at the cross and pick up the cross, to not be afraid of the cross and through it to hear the promise of resurrection life.

But I know and we heard in the Epistle today that all of that depends in large part on how we live together in the day-to-day and the week-to-week of parish life. Sometimes it's simply taking good, loving care of the obvious that will allow for the bigger mystery to break forth in this place and beyond us. So before we officially “launch” our program year, let's take this opportunity to re-ground ourselves in the little things that will make us an ever bigger presence in the world.

Let love be genuine, Grace Church.

(And that's all of us.)

Love one another with mutual affection
and do not lag in zeal!

Be ardent in spirit.

Show hospitality to strangers,
and bless those who persecute you, who persecute us.

Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep
and so far as it depends on you
and it does,
it so truly does,
live peaceably with all.”

Amen.