

February 17, 2019  
Romans 12:9-18  
Pastor Rosanna McFadden  
Creekside COB

**“You’re Welcome!”**

**Good morning! I hope you’re ready for some exercise this morning, because there’s something I want you to try with me. Instead of having you all get up and move around, I will ask you to do this work imaginatively: not only will this save us some time and effort, I’m going to ask some personal questions: this will keep your answers confidential, and hopefully allow you to be honest with yourself in your answers. I’m going to ask you a question and have you put yourself on a continuum of what your answer would be.**

**The continuum will go from least over her toward the choir to most toward the pulpit. Put yourself (mentally) where you think you belong across the front of the chancel here. We’re going to begin with an easy question: one which has an objective answer. How old are you? This end is least, so Eloise Prahm would be down at that end: Lee Markley is turning 97 next month: if he were here, he’d be on the other end. The rest of us would fall somewhere in between -- many of us east of the halfway mark. Got it? See how this works?**

**These next questions are more subjective; only you will know the answers, but please take time to honestly consider where you would put yourself. How friendly are you to other people? Not very at this end; very friendly up here. If you’re friendly to some people and not to others, take an average. How friendly are other people to you? Not very to very friendly. How much do you think God loves you? Not very much; a lot. And the last question, which some of you have probably figured out already: How much do you think God loves other people?**

**It will probably not surprise you to think that I believe that the answers to all those questions -- not the one about your age, but all**

the others -- are interrelated. I also think they are important -- perhaps even crucial -- to how we function in the world. Theology, or words about God, is a philosophical concept. Ethics is any system which prescribes what is right or wrong, good or bad. Although both theology and ethics are big complicated fields of study, for me they begin with two fundamental questions: how do we see ourselves in relation to God? And How do we see ourselves in relation to other people? Not only are these questions fundamental, they are connected. I do not believe that we can separate our relationship with God from our relationship with other people. Let me give you an example: I saw a bumper sticker the other day that said "Jesus Loves You. Everybody else thinks you're an idiot" (I cleaned that up a little for use in worship) I know that's supposed to be funny, And I'm totally on board with the Jesus Loves You part; but if you're sending the message to everyone who sees your car that they're an idiot, what does that say about you and your attitude toward other people -- including people whom you've never met?

I'm guessing that if you put yourself way over here as very friendly, but down toward the other end that people are not friendly to you, that there's a disconnect somewhere: how you perceive yourself is not what other people see. Same with the other way: if you think you're not very friendly but everybody loves you, something is out of kilter. I intentionally used "friendly" because it's a word which isn't theologically loaded, but friendliness is pale reflection of what I'm getting at. Hospitality captures the idea better, but we tend to reduce hospitality to what Romans 12:13 describes as "get into the habit of inviting guests home for dinner, or if they need lodging, for the night." That is indeed hospitality, but it is only a part of what I want to address this morning.

The book of Romans written by the apostle Paul -- it may be his last letter to the church. Although it isn't a summary of his thought, it was written at the culmination of over 20 years of teaching, preaching, and letter writing to the earliest Christian churches. Paul addresses some of the heaviest theological issues facing the church: the election of Israel, God's righteousness, justification by faith. And into all that theology: Paul adds what we know as chapters 12 to the beginning of chapter 15, which are about ethics -- or how Christians should treat other people: Christians and non-Christians. In fact, Paul implies that

others will make assumptions about whether or not we are Christians based on how we interact with them -- maybe not based on our views of sanctification and justification by faith.

I chose the Living Bible translation because the language is so natural. Listen again to some of these verses from Romans 12 and what our disposition is to be toward other people: don't just pretend you love others: really love them. Hate what is wrong. Stand on the side of the good. When others are happy, be happy with them. If they are sad, share their sorrow. Work happily together. Don't try to act big. Enjoy the company of ordinary folks. And don't think you know it all!

I don't generally think I know it all, but I received the gift of a lesson in hospitality last month. Tim and I were invited to the home of a friend whom I have volunteered; I knew that he was inviting 8 or 10 other people as a thank-you for our work together. That evening on the way to dinner, I told Tim, "I've never been to their house, but I saw pictures on Zillow a year ago when they bought it, and it looked pretty small and like it needed a lot of work. I'm not sure how this is going to work." I was correct: the house is small and there's still work in progress and projects they haven't started. We sat on folding chairs at card tables which filled their small living room and ate off mismatched plates. It was a wonderful evening. It turns out that hospitality is not about having the nicest house or the best dishes or even the best food (although this food was excellent). It's about wanting to make other people feel welcome: not pretending that you like them, but actually *liking* them and wanting to get to know them better. I have a tendency to let my own concerns about presentation get in the way of hosting others -- this was a timely reminder for me that hospitality isn't about the host, it's about the guests. Not what I want them to think about *me*, but to let them know that I am thinking about *them*. Romans 12:17 says, Do things in such a way that everyone can see you are honest clear through.

I hope you are aware that we have a Hospitality Team here at Creekside. They're a group which follows up with guests who come on Sunday mornings, and who are thinking of ways we can be welcoming before guests arrive. I hope it is also clear from Romans 12 that hospitality is not just another program of the church:

**hospitality is our attitude toward other people, whether they are inside the walls of this church or not. We all -- even me -- lead much more of our lives outside this building than inside of it. Witnessing to others about what it means to be a Christian is at least as much about how we act out there as it is about how we act in here. If I treat people differently out there than I do in here, I am not doing things in such a way that everyone can see I am honest clear through. This is what I mean by ethics: how we see ourselves in relation to other people. If we are suspicious -- because they're dangerous, or disdainful -- because they're idiots, or feel superior -- because we know the answers-- we can't really take delight in welcoming guests. Trying to impress someone is not the same as wanting to welcome them. If we aren't friendly, it's pretty likely that other people aren't going to respond positively to us.**

**That's the ethics of hospitality: how we treat one another. But there's a theological reason, too. Paul writes about it in Romans chapter 15, at the end of the section on ethics. Verse 7 says, Warmly welcome each other into the church, just as Christ has warmly welcomed you; then God will be glorified. How we treat other people is part of our relationship to God. Paul is writing specifically about the Gentiles, or non-Jews who want to become Christians, but I think it can apply to anyone whom we see as different from us. How much does God love that person? Less than God loves me? Because if God loves that person as much as God loves me, then they deserve from me the same welcome that I have received from Jesus Christ.**

**I think we do a pretty good job here at Creekside of being welcoming to guests: people share that with me often. I think it's a credit to our Hospitality Team and to each one of you that folks who come with family or come to our Fish Fry or come to a memorial services feel welcomed here. God bless you for all the different ways you greet people and make them feel at ease. I hope that hospitality isn't something you leave up to someone else, because that's not the way it works. Hospitality is our response to the love of Jesus Christ who welcomed us -- when we were still sinners -- without condition and without reservation. That is what we need to offer to one another, and to the guests we meet in this building and the strangers we meet outside of it. I want to leave you with some of these verses from Romans 12 and 15:**

**Don't just pretend that you love others: really love them. Don't try to act big. Enjoy the company of ordinary folks. And don't think you know it all! Do things in such a way that everyone can see you are honest clear through. Warmly welcome each other into the church, just as Christ has warmly welcomed you; then God will be glorified. Amen.**