

Serving Well

Romans 12:9-13

A sermon by Pastor Wayne Ibara

Makiki Christian Church

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⁹Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. ¹⁰Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. ¹¹Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. ¹²Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. ¹³Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

Context

- ❖ Romans 12—little manifesto for the church that begins with the call for everyone to *present themselves as the living sacrifice* of the church.
- ❖ Parallel with 1 Corinthians 12 and 13. Paul talks about the church as the Body of Christ; then describes the diversity within the body, made up of many different members; then emphasizes the necessity of love in the life of the body.

Our passage this morning is a parallel to 1 Corinthians 13 (the chapter on love).

Content

I like John Stott's analysis of this passage (actually, 12:9-16). Whereas many commentators throw up their hands trying to find an organizing principle to Paul's string of telegraphic exhortations, Stott describes this part of Romans 12 as "a recipe for love with 12 ingredients" (if you stretch out to verse 16). In our reading this morning, we find eight of these qualities of love, including

sincerity (9a),
discernment (9b), (*high on the list of our leadership norms*)
affection (10a), (*brotherly love, introducing family love to others*)
honor (10b),
enthusiasm (11),
patience (12),
generosity (13a),
and hospitality (13b).

(The other four are, in vv. 14-16, good will, sympathy, harmony and humility.)

Theme

There is a lot packed into this passage and in Richard Foster's treatment of it in the video upstairs this morning. Since Romans 12 is addressed to the church, and describes the life of the church, my main point about *servicing well* is this:

Christians are called to serve God and one another in the Body of Christ in a lifestyle of love that is mutual and sustainable.

Comments

Richard Foster makes a number of helpful distinctions between "true service" and "self-righteous service." For example, he says that while self-righteous service is essentially human effort, true service flows from a relationship with God deep inside us. Self-righteous service is calculating, requires external rewards, seeks human applause and is concerned about results, such as, will the person I helped now reciprocate my service?

In contrast, true service is content with hiddenness, does not seek reward or applause, and is unconcerned with results like reciprocity. It is free of the need to calculate results.

Self-righteous service is occasional, sporadic. True service flows from a lifestyle of love. It's a way of life. Self-righteous service often fractures community; true service builds community.

I want to make two observations about our own situation here at Makiki. On the one hand, I think that because of our culture, we often serve in what Richard Foster describes as a self-righteous manner. We depend on our own effort; we want to be recognized, or, if not, we at least want some benefit. We want to see some kind of result or reciprocity. We also often see service as being for a time, but not as a lifestyle. For example, I'll serve, but only for a year...

On the other hand, I think there is an awful lot of true service that also goes on in the life of our church. Our Dorcas or caring ministry, for one. *Nozomi no kai*, for another. Our teams of cooks on Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays, as well as on special occasions, like our up-coming church clean-up day. And beyond this, the countless small acts of service that many people do on their own. No one but God sees all the acts of service that make this church what it is. And that is really something to celebrate. All I need to say is, "Keep it up, Makiki!"

My biggest concern

In fact, it's this faithful service by so many that leads me to my biggest concern about the discipline of service and many conscientious, faithful believers. My concern is that we try to do too much. We don't see clearly enough that the biblical model of a lifestyle of loving service involves mutuality and sustainability. It's for the long haul, not the short-term. We give and receive, not just give, give, give.

And maybe most importantly, the primary focus of our service is within the family of faith. The picture that Paul is painting with Romans 12 is that of a vital, loving, functioning body of Christ, a family of faith, mutually giving and receiving in acts of loving service. Note verse 13—*Share with God's people who are in need*. The focus is clearly within the church itself, not with society as a whole.

This doesn't mean that our concern stops at the church door. But I think it does mean that there is a logical priority to what Paul is advocating—a lifestyle of loving service that enables the life of the Kingdom of God to take root in a congregation. Christians are not called to extend themselves to the breaking point to people generally in the world while not paying adequate attention to the very real and very significant needs of the Body. In fact, to be helpful to anyone else, the church needs to have integrity as a body of believers, *devoted to one another in brotherly love*.

Too often, I have heard either guilty confessions from within the church, or angry accusations from outside the church that Christians are just selfish and self-centered, focusing only on their needs, etc. etc. In recent years, even politicians have signed in on the issue with proposals and legislation for so-called "faith-based initiatives." I am deeply suspicious of such an agenda. And I've grown increasingly impatient with critiques of the church, particularly by people who don't know the first thing about what the church is supposed to be in the first place!

And for Christians who labor under the guilt of feeling that to be a Christian means we have to do *everything* we possibly can *for anyone* who is in need at *any time, any where*, no matter what it costs—I respectfully suggest that you are carrying a false load. Didn't Jesus himself say, "My yoke is easy, and my burden is light"?

The church vision that I've come to see in the New Testament is not of congregations that do stuff for other people in Jesus' name...though at times, such projects and pursuits may be wonderful. The vision of the church that I see in the New Testament is of loving, connected and vital communities of faith that

mutually support and sustain the life of faith, guided by the Spirit. It's like the picture of an iceberg—two-thirds or more is under water and unseen, but that's what supports the small tip that you do see above water.

When a congregation commits to undertakings that demand a great deal of time, energy and resources while ignoring the Romans 12 body life that is the essence of church life, it is asking for disaster. Twenty-five years ago, Jim Wallis put the issue in these words, which I still find memorable and true:

The greatest need in our time is not simply for kerygma, the preaching of the gospel; nor for diakonia, service on behalf of justice; nor for charisma, the experience of the Spirit's gifts; nor even for propheteia, the challenging of the king. The greatest need in our time is for koinonia, the call simply to be the church, to love one another, and to offer our lives for the sake of the world. The creation of living, breathing, loving communities of faith at the local church level is the foundation of all the other answers. The community of faith incarnates a whole new order, offers a visible and concrete alternative, and issues a basic challenge to the world as it is. The church must be called to be the church, to rebuild the kind of community that gives substance to the claims of faith. (The Call to Conversion, revised edition 2005, p. 112)

What is the best and primary way that Christians might serve the world? First of all, by serving God and one another in the way that Romans 12 describes. Everything else finds its energy and impetus from this.

Small steps, or How do we serve one another?

Richard Foster suggests seven specific and small acts of service that help us put this discipline into practical use. They are:

- 1) The service of guarding the reputation of others: How can I avoid backbiting and gossip during the coming week?
- 2) The service of being served: How can I avoid the prideful act of refusing to allow myself to be served?
- 3) The service of common courtesy: What deed of compassion can I perform this week?
- 4) The service of hospitality: To whom can I offer the generosity of a room, meal, or simple fellowship?
- 5) The service of listening: Who needs my listening ear this week?
- 6) The service of bearing the burdens of another: Do I know a person who is struggling with hurt and suffering? How can I help her or him this week?
- 7) The service of sharing the "word of Life" with another. Hearing God for others: Is there someone I know for whom I strongly believe God would like to whisper a blessing?