

When Love Gets Difficult. Part Seven. How I View Us

Romans 12.4-5, 6-8, 13, 15a, 16-18

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When you are interacting with a fellow Christian . . .

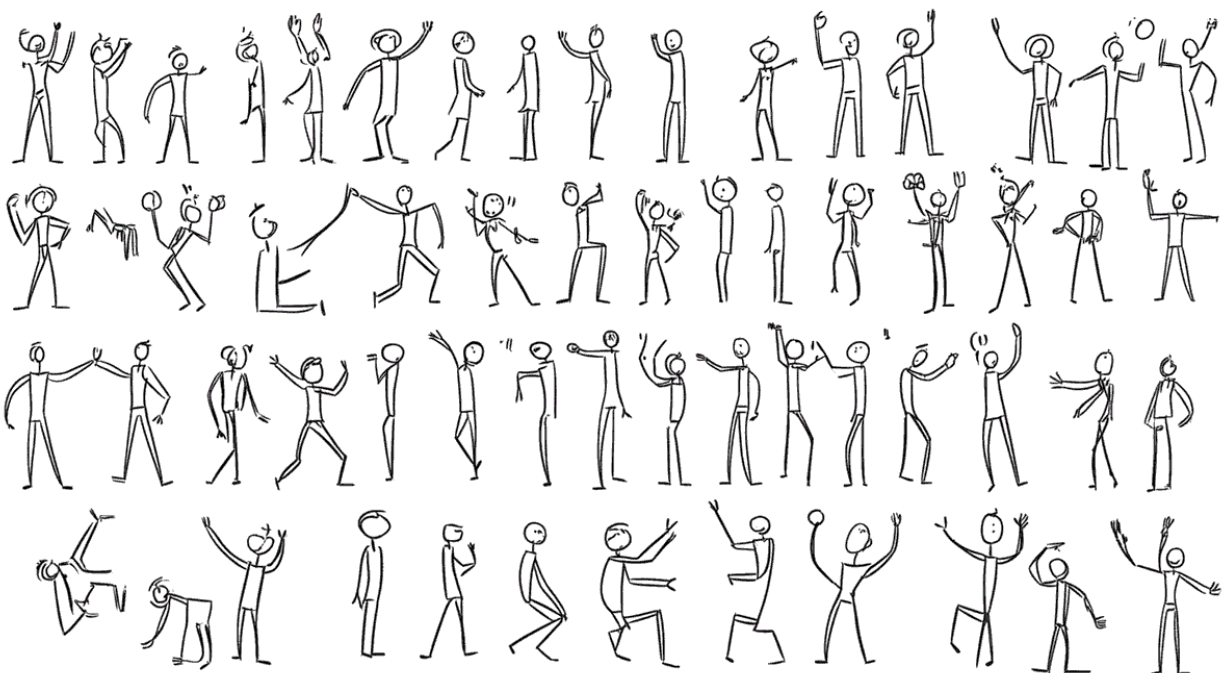


. . . when you and a brother or sister come together into the same moment, what is the basic lens through which you see yourself and the other person in that interaction?

Do you see yourself primarily as a separate and distinct entity standing opposite that person?



Or . . . do you see yourself as part of something larger? Is there some other larger entity that most defines you? Your family of origin? Your school? Your nation? Your ethnic roots? Your gender? Your favorite team? Your favorite brand?



Especially if you were born in the half of the world that we call the East. you are much more likely to have a communal sense of identity.



For most us, especially those born and raised in the United States, this right here is the sum of me. I may be part of some larger entity, but it doesn't really define me. What you need to know about me, what defines me, what makes me me, is completely contained right here within the walls of my skin.

It's how we've been trained to think, and it's how we have trained our kids to think. The highest goal in American parenting? Most parents would say it is to raise their kids to be independent.

* * *

This morning as we step into Romans chapter 12 we come face to face with a Christian way of thinking about our essential selves that most of us will experience as something of a collision, because it runs so counter to the ethos that is so prevalent in the world around us, especially this part of the world.

Because according to the Scriptures . . .



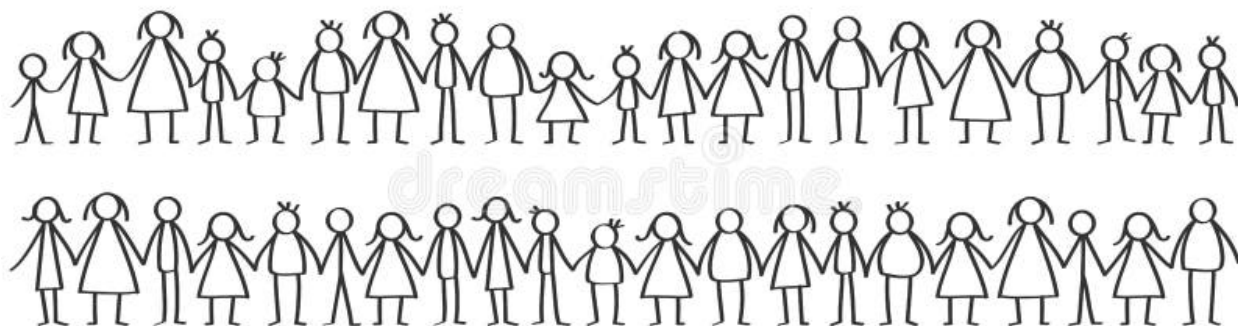
this is not a faithful picture of who I am as I come into a moment with you. I do not begin and end with me.

This is a faithful picture of who I am . . .



If we are followers of Jesus, you and I are brothers and sisters to each other.

And this is also a faithful picture of who I am.



If we are followers of Jesus, you and I are part of a larger thing called the church family, that shapes and defines who we are.

The default word form in American English is the singular. This is who I am. This is what I do.

The default word form in New Testament Greek is the plural. This is who we are. This is what we do.

Almost every single command or imperative in the teaching of Jesus and in the New Testament letters is plural – something Jesus is saying to us together, asking of us together, inviting us into together.

At the end of our service today, we'll share in communion. Part of the words of institution that Jesus gave the church are the phrases, "Eat this, *all* of you." And "Drink this, *all* of you."

There is a sense in which virtually all the invitations and commands in the New Testament could end with that phrase:

All of you, together, love, serve, encourage, forgive.

You probably remember some of the lines with which Paul begins this chapter we've been exploring. In

Romans 12.4-5 Paul says

For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.

Paul describes here a spiritual reality that is a wonderful and mysterious and for many of us an utterly unexpected dimension of the Christian life. The church.

Paul says, if we are Christians, we are automatically part of this larger thing called the church. By virtue of having the same Father, and having given our allegiance to the same King, we are by definition part of the same family of faith.

Go to church is an American phrase. You won't find it anywhere in the Bible. Be *part* of a church is a biblical phrase.

Paul says we are *one*. We form one body.

We are not side-by-siders, who happen to show up at the same time for the same event, we are one-with-each-others, part of the same family.

Glance around this room. This is not just a room full of individuals. These are your brothers and sisters. This is a family. *Your* family.

And we're are not just one with each other, wonderful and mysterious as that is. Paul says, even more mysteriously, that we *belong* to each other.

We aren't side by side bricks, we are ligaments and tendons and muscles in the same body, interconnected, joined to one another, supporting one another, strengthening one another as together we support and strengthen the whole.

We are not just part of the same family. We are brothers and sisters. As it says in Hebrews 3.1 (NLT): we are "dear brothers and sisters who belong to God."

It's with that reality in mind that Paul calls us in

Romans 12.10a to

Be devoted to one another in love.

I pointed out last week that this short phrase has two words that come straight from the home, one that means family affection and one that means brotherly love.

Literally this passage says something like:

Have for one another the fond affection that you would normally reserve for your family members, loving one another as if you were brothers and sisters – because you are.

Or

Romans 12.10a

Be devoted to one another in love.

See each other as family and love each other as family.

I think many of us, especially perhaps those who grew up in the US, got the impression that the church is best understood as an obligation. It comes with a burden of responsibility. It is something you are supposed to do.

In this passage and the many others like it, Paul reframes how we see the church. Instead of a burden imposed on us, Paul says the church is a gift given to us. God has blessed us by placing us in the loving arms of a family.

Some of you will have noticed that I rarely ever refer to you all as the church anymore. I speak of you as the *church family*. That's very intentional.

Think about what being a family means.

I was thinking this week about what being family has meant for us in our home.

- Hanging out together
 - Meals around the table
 - Playing games
- Enjoying each other
 - Family jokes and humor
 - Quoting lines from favorite movies
 - Enjoying time on weekends, vacations, road trips, holidays
- Accepting each other
 - Knowing every facial expression and tone of voice
 - Bearing with one another – there goes Dad with his puns again
- Honoring each other
 - Putting our phones away when we're together
 - Not putting each other down
 - Working things out when we hurt each other
 - Asking forgiveness and forgiving each other
- Serving each other
 - Being responsible for our part of family life
 - Doing chores, helping out around the house
 - Helping each other out
- Celebrating each other
 - Celebrating each other on Birthdays and when there are important accomplishments or victories
- Being there for each other
 - Attending each other's events/games/recitals
 - Showing love and care and support when you don't make the team or get the part or get invited to the dance
 - Sticking up for each other when others are unkind

That's how Paul wants us to think about ourselves..

The New Testament consistently uses a word that's a bit hard to translate that captures this idea of the church being a family of affection.

It's a word we were introduced to in our Colony of Heaven series on the Book of Philippians. It's the Greek word *koinonia*. It means **sharing something in common**. It implies an active participation or partnership in something larger than ourselves.

The word shows up twice in Acts 2.42-47, which is sort of a charter for the church, which you may remember from when we preached on it this spring.

Acts 2.42-46

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to **fellowship**, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and **had everything in common**. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts.

When we become followers of Jesus, we are placed in a family of affection, we are surrounded by and joined to other brothers and sisters, and we are invited to actively participate together in a shared life.

When we get to Romans 12, Paul picks up this idea of active participation in a shared life and he runs with it.

There are six different phrases he uses to paint a picture of the shared life we are invited into as family.

Here is what it will look like when we see each other as family and love each other as family.

First, as family we are invited to share our God-given abilities with one another.

Romans 12.6-8

We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

Ethan already spoke on this passage several weeks ago.

Paul says we all have found ourselves on the receiving end of God's incredible generosity. Every one of us has received a bounty of different gifts and abilities.

But here's the twist. When he hands us our gifts, the name on the tag isn't ours. It has a bunch of other people's names on it. God gave us our gifts so we could pass them on to others, putting them to use for the benefit of our sisters and brothers.

Let me share with you a sort of lived parable of the church using its time and talents to benefit one another.

I'd like to tell you how I singlehandedly got a three hundred pound water heater out of the furnace room in my basement, around a tight corner, over a chair lift, up the basement stairs that had a chair rail, around another tight corner, and out of the house without a single hole in the wall or scratch on the floor or pulled muscle or broken bone.

Here's how I did it. I singlehandedly took my phone out of my pocket and sent a text to some friends from the church, and that night seven of them showed up to give me a hand.

Give me a hand?! Who am I kidding? They did all of the work.



And it was such a joy to watch them do it, each of them finding just the right places and just the right ways to serve where they could be most helpful. Showing up with helpful equipment. Problem solving things like tank position, hand holds, space limitations, where to stand, how to get leverage. Offering alternative suggestions when we ran into dead ends, or which there were several. Encouraging each other, helping each other, stepping in to relieve each other as we muscled this whale to the surface.

What a beautiful lived-out picture of sharing our God-given abilities and time with one another.

What gifts has God entrusted to you for the sake of your brothers and sisters? And how are you deploying those?

As family we are invited to share our God-given abilities with one another.

Second, as family, we are invited to share our God-given resources with one another.

Romans 12.13a

Share with the Lord's people who are in need.

The Bible makes an important distinction between ownership and stewardship.

When I own something, it is mine to do with as I please.

In the New Testament, starting with Acts chapter 2, we are invited to see our possessions differently.

Just as with our spiritual gifts and abilities and our time, God calls us to see ourselves as stewards of our possessions and our financial resources, not owners of them. When I am the steward of something, it doesn't belong to me. It still belongs to the One who entrusted it to me, and I'm to put it to use in a way that pleases him.

We have not only been generously given to in terms of abilities. We have also been given much in the way of resources. How do you think about the resources that you have? Whose are they? What might change in the way you used your resources if you saw them more in terms of a trust than a possession?

As family, we are invited to share our God-given resources with one another.

Third, as family we are invited to share our homes with one another.

Romans 12.13b

Practice hospitality.

Having someone into your home was one of the most important societal practices in the ancient near East, and it is one of the rarest in present day US.

And that's too bad. Because sharing a meal with someone is one of the best ways to get to know each other better. Conversation slows down, and there's ample time to practice curiosity and ask questions, to move past initial impressions and to really begin to get to know each other.

This admonition from Paul applies both to extending a welcome to others in the church family and to our friends and neighbors who are outside the faith. We'll focus in on that dimension of this directive in a few weeks.

When is the last time you had someone from the church family into your home or at your table? Is there a way you could be more intentional about setting other things aside in order to make space and time in your schedule to have your brothers and sisters over? If you're not sure where to start, our Connection Dinners are a great place to jump in.

As family we are invited to share our homes with one another.

Fourth, as family we are invited to share our hearts with one another.

Romans 12.15

Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.

It's easy, especially when we get busy, to seal off our hearts a bit from each other, and to have the perfunctory pleasant exchanges, but not really to take the time or make the effort to let each other in.

Paul expects our sharing with each other to take place at a much deeper level than that, for us to really know and be known by one another. I suppose you could say he is inviting us to make the outside of ourselves more porous, to let more of our hearts out and to let more of others' hearts in.

God intends for us to enjoy the kind of connection with each other that has us carrying each other around in our hearts, being mindful of the circumstances others are in and praying for them and checking in to see how things are going.

When we do, the tears of joy and the tears of sadness in each other's eyes will show up more and more in our eyes as well.

Are you letting yourself get close enough to your sisters and brothers that when their hearts are feeling something deeply, that emotion resonates with something in your own heart? I wonder if there's someone in the church family that God is prompting you to reach out to – to grab coffee or go for a walk or head out in a canoe, and begin to get to know each other more deeply.

As family we are invited to share our hearts with one another.

Finally, as family we invited to share a commitment to unity with one another.

There are two passages in Romans 12 that communicate this invitation. The first is.

Romans 12.16 which says

Live in harmony with one another.

In the original it almost seems to say, "Have the same thoughts as one another. Think in the same way."

But that isn't what Paul is calling us to here. I like the way the NASB translates this. It says not "Have the same *thoughts* as one another," but:

Be of the same *mind toward* one another.

In our culture today, divided as it is, we often assume that the only way to experience harmony with someone else is if in fact they think the same thoughts that we do.

Because of the way news comes to us today, through carefully curated monocular channels, increasingly two things will happen at the same time: first, all of us will actually have more and more different experiences of the same event, because we're only getting one very specific version of it.

But second, we will all feel as though we have all had, or should have had, exactly the same experience, because the only voices that we are hearing are ones that sound just like ours.

If we're not careful, we could inadvertently let that divide us. Paul calls us to something quite different, to a unity outside of and deeper than our particular views.

Last Sunday after church we had the college group over to our house for lunch. What a great group of students! And what a gift to have them part of our church! I hope you'll make a point to get to know some of them.

After we wrapped up, five or six of the students hung out for an hour or so and I asked each of them to describe their experience of the Charlie Kirk assassination.

Four things struck me. First, every one of them experienced that event very differently. They were all across a spectrum. Some hardly knew of him. Some were so familiar with him and listened to him so often that they saw him almost as an older brother.

Second, those who did know of him had different takes on his approach. Some admired everything about him without exception, including both his faith and his political views. Some admired his faith and generally agreed with his political positions but disagreed with some of the bluntness and insensitivity with which he spoke about them. Others admired his faith but may have had some other perspectives on his political convictions.

Third, to a person, they all agreed that resorting to violence and taking someone's life, whoever that person was, no matter what they believed or how they communicated, was completely evil and completely unjustified. They also agreed that any mocking of his death was utterly inappropriate, and exposed a major concern about how violence as entertainment in movies and video games led to an unreal view of actual violence.

And then last, and this really struck me as I thought back on the conversation, they could not have been more mature and gracious as they talked: listening to one another without judgment, accepting the fact that they each had a different take on things, affirming where they saw common ground in their views, but not insisting that the others see it the way they saw it.

To me that exchange was a beautiful example of taking to heart Paul's admonition to live in harmony with one another and be of the same mind toward one another.

Of course we share a commitment to the biblical essentials that make us Christian believers: the authority of scripture, the Lordship of Christ, his divine nature, the requirement of faith in Christ to be made right with God, the missional call of the church, and so on. But we should not expect, nor should we require, that everybody else be where we are on non-essential issues.

Paul calls us to see not the *issues* the same way, but, informed by our faith, informed by the mercies of God, to see *each other* the same way.

James captures beautifully that way of seeing when he writes in James chapter three:

The wisdom that comes from above is first of all pure. It is also peace loving, gentle at all times, and willing to yield to others. (James 3.17)

How might we experience our differences of perspective not as problems to be overcome but as opportunities to humbly learn and grow together? What if our response to difference was not, "How could you see it that way?!" but "I'm curious how you arrived at your view. Tell me more."

Which leads us to the other passage in Romans 12 that invites us to a shared commitment to unity.

Romans 12.18

If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

Increasingly the world around us models that there is a ticking clock in every relationship that starts the moment we begin to get to know each other.

It is counting down the seconds until the moment when either you offend me or you hurt me. The moment that happens, we're done.

Jesus calls us to a way of being within the church family that could not be more radically different.

Jesus invites us into a peace and unity of a completely different and of a lasting sort. He says we are enabled to live at peace with one another when we center our lives on him, the Prince of Peace, who laid down his life to secure our peace.

And we can continue to experience unity even when the other person has hurt us, as brothers and sisters in the same family will do.

At the heart of Jesus' rescue mission was a sacrificial death by which Jesus purchased and extended forgiveness to us. Then he turns us toward our brothers and sisters and invites us to extend that same forgiveness. Think of the parable of the unforgiving servant.

In the early church, there was an extended time during every worship service when the people in the church greeted each other. As the greeting began, one of the church leaders announced that if that if anybody was having difficulty getting along, they should come together to where the church leaders were seated and they should work out their differences and forgive each other right then and there, so they could take communion together with nothing between them.

Paul describes this peaceable way of being family three chapters later, in Romans 15.5-7, in a passage that is a beautiful invitation and prayer for us this morning.

Romans 15.5-7

May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you – that is, move toward one another and draw each other in, just as Christ moved toward you and drew you in – in order to bring praise to God.

* * *

Here is God's invitation to us today.

As family we are invited to share . . .

our God-given abilities with one another.

our God-given resources with one another.

our homes with one another.

our hearts with one another.

a commitment to unity with one another.

Think of what it would mean for us to be part of that sort of extraordinary family.

And imagine what it would be like if this were the sort of church that the world encountered when they looked in upon us and watched the way we lived out our love for one another.

In so many respects, this is who we are already are and what the people around us in this community already see! So many of these qualities mark who we are together!

May God continue to form in us these expressions of his living presence in our midst.

Communion

Communion is Jesus' act of hospitality toward us. As brothers and sisters who belong to him, he invites us to share a common meal that is a picture of many things, one of which is his sacrificial death, by which he rescued us and brought us into his family of faith, and one of which is the family of faith into which he rescued us, our comm-unity, our comm-union, our shared union, in Christ.

As we take communion today, as an expression of our being brothers and sisters together in the family of faith, when you pass the plates, please says something like Jesus gave his life for you, or this is the body and blood of Jesus, given for you.

We'll take the bread individually, as it comes to us, but when the cup comes, please hold it until we've all received it, and then I'll lead us in taking it together as a further picture of our unity together in Christ.

If you are not a follower of Jesus, we love having you in our midst. Please don't feel any pressure to take part in this meal. It is really intended for those who are followers. I'd encourage you just to pass along the elements as they come to you, and perhaps to use this time to contemplate the sacrificial death that lies at the middle of this commemoration, and consider what that might mean for you.

Come to the feast, to the table of Jesus, where he welcomes us.