

“Some Operating Principles”

Romans 12:9-21 – September 7, 2008

INTRO: This portion of the letter to the Romans gives us some specifics on how to live together in Christian community. They may not be easy things to carry off, but this is a section of Scripture that speaks to us in pretty plain language. And it's not difficult for us to see how this way of living together is crucial for a sense of community to form among people.

With classes getting underway in lots of schools, it's the time that new rules are set and expectations for behavior are posted. This past week I read about the brand new Oak Creek East Middle School, where the principal made all kinds of announcements about when the students would go to lunch, how to enter the cafeteria, and how to line up. Since it is a new building, they were not yet sure how the traffic patterns were going to work during the lunch hour. And at an academy for small children, the students were learning the routine for bathroom breaks. One teacher standing near the door of a girl's restroom could be heard saying, “No dancing in the restroom please.” A fourth grade teacher in another school used a ball of yarn in a get-acquainted exercise. As each child told something about themselves, they held onto a section of the yarn and threw the ball to someone else. Soon all the students and teachers were intertwined. What they learned from that exercise was that they were going to try and approach everything this year, connected together. *(Journal Sentinel)*

In a college campus restroom, the following instructions were printed above the hot-air hand dryer: 1. Shake excess water from hands. 2. Push button and release. 3. Rub hands briskly under nozzle. 4. Dryer stops automatically. Underneath all this, someone had scratched in: 5. Wipe hands on pants. That last instruction was perhaps the most valuable one.

When groups of people gather, it's good to have operating principles—guidelines about how people will function together. I've just rejoined the Lutheran A Cappella Choir, and received the choir information sheet. It tells about rehearsal times, attendance rules, expectations for practice outside of rehearsals, concert information. I read through all the information, and wished instead of a full page, we could just tell people to be responsible—if you are in this group, then make a commitment to participate fully.

I'm someone who doesn't like a whole list of rules—I'd rather keep things simple. One of the useful operating principles that my parents taught me was “righty-tighty, lefty-loosey.” That may sound totally silly, but think of how many times we use that principle every day: when dealing with a faucet; trying to remove or insert screws into a board; adjusting a valve, opening or closing a lid on a bottle or jar.

In this particular passage today, Paul certainly wasn't into keeping things simple. These verses contain 26 different instructions for people to follow. Paul must have looked at those early Christians and knew they needed guidelines about how to live together--and the concept of less is more wasn't yet popular.

For those of us living in the 21st century, the list continues to hold challenges in our time: “Bless your enemies. Get along with each other. Don't let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good.” *(The Message)*

Throughout this passage, a reverse response is called for. It's not just living by the typical rules of the world—which could be to meet evil with evil—to toss back to someone what they just gave to you. It's to respond in a surprisingly different way—out of different values and goals.

What happens in our dealings with people, usually depends on who is allowed to set the pace for others to follow. If hatred and anger become the decisive force, it drags goodness down to its level. If goodness predominates, it tends to lift others to its level.

I believe Jesus' way of life can lift us up, can call forth the best from us. He had many pithy ways of outlining his operating principles, but the one that pretty much covers everything for me is to love God with your whole heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself.

Perhaps another way of saying this, is what Bishop Reuben Job came up with in his three simple rules: Do No Harm, Do Good, Stay in Love with God. Bishop Job has done some study into our Wesleyan heritage. Using John Wesley's General Rules of the Church, he has distilled them down to three.

Bishop Job was motivated by the deep divisions he sees in our world. “We have had this naïve expectation that we will just get better as we become educated and share more of the world's

resources. But the world of peace and plenty for all has not happened. Nations are increasingly hostile toward one another; communities are divided around issues of education, development, and the status quo. Religion is divided with each claiming to have a firm grip on the truth. Denominations and congregations are divided over doctrine and what constitutes faithful discipleship. And families are divided by competing agendas, rival priorities, and the daily pressure to survive and thrive in an increasingly competitive culture. The louder our voices and the more strident our rhetoric, the weaker and more wounded we become. Our witness to the redeeming love of God loses its authenticity and its power as our unwillingness to be reconciled continues. Those who seek to follow Jesus must be asking if this is the way Christians are to live. Are we really measuring up to our calling as children of God? Is there a better way—a simpler way?" (*3 Simple Rules*)

If you are into simple is better, maybe these rules will work for you: Do no harm—don't injure or hurt others. Do good—love our neighbors as well as ourselves. Stay in love with God—stay connected to God—stay on the path of faithfulness. Spend time in prayer, Bible reading and study.

If the early church had been following these three simple rules, maybe Paul wouldn't have needed his list of 26 instructions. Bishop Job believes that congregations are a fertile ground for practicing the rules. Pastor Jan and I hope to have some groups look at his little book. If we studied these rules and took them seriously, there might be some radical changes in store for us. We would be a part of a community where gossip about each other, cliques, competition, and angry words, just wouldn't have their place.

Fred Craddock tells the story of a church that set an operating rule, that seemed antithetical to what churches are to be about. This was a church in a little town in Tennessee. The nearby Oak Ridge Laboratory was expanding and new families were moving into the area. Fred was their young pastor and he urged the people of this little white-frame church, to invite the newcomers to join them. "They wouldn't fit in here," was the reply he received. A week later, at a congregational meeting, they made a motion which said that to be a member of their church, a person must own property in the county. The motion passed, over the pastor's objections. Fred visited that town many years later. They pulled up to the old church building and found it to be a busy place—lots of cars in the parking lot. Out front was a big sign: "Barbecue, all you can eat." And, it's not a church dinner advertisement. The old church is now a restaurant. Fred and his wife went inside and found all kinds of people there. And Fred said to his wife, "It's a good thing this is not still a church, otherwise these people couldn't be here." (*Craddock Stories*)

Churches may not have property ownership requirements connected to church membership, but believe me, there are ways we operate together where people can end up getting hurt or not feeling a part of the body of Christ. Unfortunately, in our culture, Doing No Harm, is often a foreign concept. Yet, if we are really followers of Christ, it needs to be one of our operating principles. We may need to choose Jesus' way--living with a different set of goals and values--rather than the world's way.

And we can't do that by ourselves. "Genuine love involves something greater than the efforts of our individual hearts. It requires a healthy community life, spiritual vitality, and living in peace with all persons—seeing them as children of God. (Thomas Troeger)

Desmond Tutu has said: that when we "enhance the humanity of another person—when we see them as someone created by God, we enhance our own humanity."

I agree with Bishop Job, that often the starting point is to "do no harm" to one another. As this Fall season begins, and I begin my ministry among you, perhaps these three rules could become our operating principles. So, if you're willing, let's see if we have them. I'll say them, and you repeat them, and then we'll say them together and hopefully try to live them out together. Do No Harm. Do Good. Stay in Love with God.

--Sue Burwell