



The Kindness of God

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Brookside Community Church
Pentecost 13B – August 19, 2018
Romans 1:16-2:6

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To follow Jesus and become a radically inclusive faith community, we must resist the temptation to judge others. Instead, we must be willing to be a radically repentant people, witnessing to the power and love and radical kindness of God.

Kindness¹

Naomi Shihab Nye, 1952

*Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,
feel the future dissolve in a moment
like salt in a weakened broth.
What you held in your hand,
what you counted and carefully saved,
all this must go so you know
how desolate the landscape can be
between the regions of kindness.
How you ride and ride
thinking the bus will never stop,
the passengers eating maize and chicken
will stare out the window forever.*

*Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness
you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho
lies dead by the side of the road.
You must see how this could be you,
how he too was someone
who journeyed through the night with plans
and the simple breath that kept him alive.*

*Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.
You must wake up with sorrow.
You must speak to it till your voice
catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth.
Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
only kindness that ties your shoes
and sends you out into the day to gaze at bread,
only kindness that raises its head
from the crowd of the world to say
It is I you have been looking for,
and then goes with you everywhere
like a shadow or a friend.*

¹ Naomi Shihab Nye, from *Words Under the Words: Selected Poems* (Portland, Or: Eighth Mountain Press, 1995).

“Hey, I know that voice...”

I want to start out a little light hearted with you today. I want to play an ice-breaker. I’m going to give you a few rules, or habits of speech, and see if you begin to recognize what you hear. Rule 1: add “very” or “really” a multiple of two or three times to any simple adjective. For example, “They are really, really, really bad people.” Rule 2: Use the word “not” before an adjective, or even use it in combination with rule 1. For example, “They are bad people. They are really, really not good people.” Rule 3: Reference a number of people. For example, “I have heard from multiple sources, hundreds of sources, the bad things they have done. My friend, who happens to be very successful, has told me how bad they are.” Rule 4: Add, “I don’t know, but that’s what they are telling me.” For example: “I have heard from hundreds of sources how bad they are. I don’t know, but that’s what they are telling me.” Rule 5: End your statement with, “Believe me.”

What do you think? Is that a voice you recognize?

Maybe rules 6 through 10 would be to make a list people to be excluded, tell the world that you are their biggest supporter, blame them for all of the world’s problems, and then claim that by excluding them we will make ourselves great.

What about now? Is that a voice you recognize now? If not, how about we add in some racism, some homophobia, some old-school bigotry, misogyny, and maybe corruption? And let’s do whatever we can to get the support of those “so-called” Christians?

Thank God we’re not like them! Right? Am I right? I mean, give yourself a pat on the back. Since we’ve all got our stuff together. I mean, we’re not like them at all, are we? We except everyone. Right? We’re not judgmental at all. Right? Isn’t it great to be one of the good guys?

Okay, so let’s play our second game. How many people know what I did just there? I used the rhetoric of someone that I knew everyone would recognize, used it to stir up your emotions, allowed you to pat yourself on the back, and then condemned you for it. Kind of like a rhetorical jiu-jitsu move.

Now, can you imagine members of this church 100 years from now reading or hearing this sermon and trying to figure out who I’m talking about. This is the challenge we have with our passage from Romans this morning.

Historical Situation of Romans

I know many of you have been spiritually formed in a church that doesn’t care too much for the Apostle Paul. There are lots of reasons to be turned off by the Pauline texts in our Bibles. Mostly, as I’ve said before, that comes out the need to avoid scriptural landmines. But today, I’m going to make the suggestion that most of what people think they know about Paul is wrong—and if we dive deep into this passage today, I hope we will hear the divine calling to be a more repentant, loving, and

welcoming people, one that witnesses to that “deepest thing inside [us],” as the poet Naomi Nye put it —the radical kindness of God.

The passage from Romans 1:18-32 is probably the one most quoted among Christians as evidence of what the Bible says about homosexuality. Except, it doesn’t talk about homosexual love at all. It talks about passions, and it talks about desire. And it talks about what it calls “natural” and “unnatural.” And there is a lot we could deal with this morning if we wanted to get into the specifics. But rather than do that, I want you to see the bigger picture first.

Romans, like all of Paul’s epistles, is a letter written by one of the most prominent founders of Christianity—the one who could be easily claimed as being responsible for the spread of Christianity. This letter was written to a broken and divided community. The evidence of the deep brokenness is there in the first few verses. The divisions were mainly ethnic. This was a community rethinking their faith, retaining their relationship with God, retaining their relationship with each other—and trying to build their lives off of the teachings of Jesus.

If we had time, we could look at this conflict in the early church in some detail. Needless to say, this was not just a division within the Roman congregation—it split right through the entire formation of this new movement of Jesus followers, a split among its founders. If we had time this morning, we could look through the story in Acts and learn more about Peter and the accusations made against Paul. As we heard in the story from Acts last week, Peter had heard a voice from God telling him to open up a space in his faith to welcome non-Jewish members. God had told him, “Don’t call profane what I have called holy.” We would read about how Paul had gone from being an extremist—a persecutor of Christians in order to safeguard the purity of Judaism—to now opening up the faith to anyone and everyone. We would read about how Paul was kicked out of the synagogue in Ephesus, beaten and tortured in the street. We would read about how Jesus’s brother, James and his followers, were going from gathering to gathering treating non-Jews as if they were outsiders. We would hear about Paul’s confrontation with Peter, who though he had been called by God to open up a space for everyone, still refused to eat with the Gentiles when James and his troublemakers were around.

We would leave Acts and read the letter to Galatians, how Paul tells that congregation not to listen to James and his boys, not to accept any gospel that makes them second-guess God’s welcome. We would hear Paul use the strongest of language as he tells the church in Galatia to reject James’ teachings. Then, we would come back to Romans and begin in the beginning, hearing Paul tell how he is not afraid of the gospel—the one that has the power to bring salvation to everyone—first to the Jews, then to all nations (Romans 1:16).

The church in Rome, see, was a divided congregation. This beloved community of reconciliation built on the radical and healing welcome of God found in Jesus Christ was fracturing, splitting among ethnic lines. Paul’s letter to the church in Rome was aimed to address this fracture, this split caused by James and those like them, claiming that the Greeks within the Roman church don’t really belong.

The Jiu Jitsu “Sting Operation”

Once we see the larger situation of the story, we then can begin to piece together how this clobber passage from Romans fits in to the larger framework of the letter. Then, we can begin pulling this passage apart, bit-by bit. Our passage mentions idolatry. In the Greco-Roman world, there were numerous temples dedicated to countless gods, with sexual rituals playing a central role. In any temple, you could find male and female prostitutes engaged in cultic rituals. These are the non-procreative sex acts that our passage this morning refers to. It’s enough, I think, just to make the point that this picture has nothing at all to do with the loving and committed relationship between two consenting adults of the same sex. Still, I think it does point to how divided the Roman congregation was both ethnically and religiously as they sought to figure out who they were together.

What we have is the picture of a community riddled with judgement, with divisions threatening to shatter the movement Jesus began. It is drawn together of people who had only recently been welcomed in to this new Jewish movement of Jesus followers, with the severe prejudices of the Jewish community against them, with leaders like Paul who argued for God’s radical welcome, and James who taught that non-Jewish men needed to be circumcised, would always be second class, and would not be allowed to eat with the wider community. Once we understand that division, we can begin to see how this rebuke from Paul plays out.

You might ask yourself then why Paul would do this. It’s clear that this passage (Romans 1:18-32), with its harsh judgements, deep prejudices, ridicule and even name calling is aimed to stir up emotions. It would no-doubt make the Greek/Gentile hearers deeply uneasy, and it would stir up the the emotions of those Jewish members, who—following James—in their prejudice really didn’t believe that the Gentiles belonged. If Paul is trying to create a culture of radical welcome, claiming that God’s love as revealed in Jesus is available to everyone, why the harsh judgement?...If Paul is aiming to bring reconciliation and heal divisions, why play into these judgmental and divisive emotions? Now, that is the right question.

Following the work of recent scholarship on Paul, namely Colvin Porter and Douglas Campbell (whose interpretation is deeply theological and historically grounded), I want to ask you to do something you’re likely not used to doing on Sunday mornings. I want to ask you to grab a bible and open to the first chapter of Romans. I want to teach you to identify what’s known as *prosopopoeia*, or “speech in character.” Take a pencil and, in the margins next to the beginning of verse 18, pencil in a big opening quotation mark. Then, follow down to the end of verse 32 and put a closing quotation marks. And, if you want to be bold, in the space between put a bit question mark. This passage is what is known as *prosopopoeia*. It is a self-contained discourse. Notice how the passage is filled with “they” and “them,” but when you shift into chapter 2 you, the rhetoric begins with “you.”

This divisive rhetoric, the argument goes, is not actually Paul’s. It is Paul, borrowing from a standard argument found within wider Judaism at the time used to criticize the culture and religious practices of non-Jews. By including it, Paul is whipping up an emotional response by bringing to mind the familiar beliefs about outsiders that common Jewish folks would have felt. I can imagine, in a largely

Jewish room, by the time you were ending this passage, most its hearers would be patting themselves on the back. “Thank God we’re not like them! Right? Give yourself a pat on the back. Since we’ve all got our stuff together.”

And then... here comes what I call Paul’s rhetorical Jiu-Jitsu in Romans 2:1: “Therefore, you have no excuse!” Paul switches from “they” language to “you” language. “Do you imagine you can escape the judgement of God when you judge others but refuse to judge yourselves?”

Calvin Porter puts it this way, “The shift to direct address, the second person singular, along with the coordinating conjuncture “therefore” indicates that the reader who agrees with or is responsible for the discourse in 1:18-32 is now the person being addressed.”² The whole of chapter 2 then begins laying out words of condemnation for the judgmental attitude of those who had just been patting themselves on the back. In other words, if you were part of the Roman congregation and you had just agreed with Romans 1:18-32, you have now been identified as part of the problem. By the time we arrive at chapter 3, the playing field has been leveled, and Paul begins one of the most important theological works in the history of the church for understanding the radical inclusiveness of God.

One of my all time favorite passages in the Bible is here, in Romans 2:4: “Do you not know that it is the kindness of God that leads you to repentance?” The kindness of God, the creative sense of compassion deep within us, the deepest thing inside us, yearning to be bold and break free. That’s the deep truth that heals our communities.

And here we have it. The passage that has been used to keep people out, to exclude sexual minorities, is actually a rhetoric contrary to the message of Paul, used as part of a sting operation to remind people of the truth at the heart of the gospel: the radical kindness of God.

The challenge for us this morning is that we would learn to be forgiving, welcoming, and repentant. To follow Jesus and become a radically inclusive faith community, my prayer is that we learn to resist the temptation to judge others. Instead, I pray that we will be willingly be a repentant people, witnessing to the power and love and radical kindness of God.

² Calvin Porter, “Romans 1: 18– 32: Its Role in the Developing Argument,” *New Testament Studies* 40/ 2 (1994): 223. Quoted in Colby Martin, *Unclobber: Rethinking Our Misuse of the Bible on Homosexuality* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2016), p. 185).

Reflection Worksheet

Part 7: The Kindness of God

Romans 2-4 is an undoing of Romans 1:18-32

Romans 1:18-32	Romans 2 - 4
God's wrath is now against the ungodly (1:18).	The kindness of God leads us to repentance (2:4); God's judgement is on all of us, leading us to the future that will come (2:5-6).
God's judgement is specifically toward the Gentile others.	God shows no partiality (2:9-11).
God gives up on people and gives them over to wickedness (1:24, 26, 28).	God gives life to the dead and calls into existence things that do not exist (4:17).
Religion is used to establish, maintain, and strengthen boundaries when threatened (1:18-32). If you resonate with this you have missed the gospel.	Paul refutes the discourse of religious and ethnic exclusion, with its attitudes and practices (2:1-16)

Questions for Conversation and Reflection

1. The lesson this morning claims that the passage in Romans 1 that has been used to exclude sexual minorities is actually a rhetoric contrary to the message of Paul. This is what is known as *prosopopoeia*. It was included as a part of a “sting” operation to emphasize the kindness of God found in the teachings of Jesus. Do you find this argument convincing? Why or why not?
2. Paul's letter to the Roman church was aimed at addressing division within the first-century church. What are some issues dividing Christians today?
3. How do you understand the relationship between God's kindness and the Pastor Michael's claim that we are called to be a repentant people?