

Sermon Series: Life Together

Loving Well

Romans 12:1-2, 9-21

by David Hockett

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NT Wright tells the story of a friend who had recently been appointed chairman of the company for which he worked. Over lunch they discussed how the transition was going. With a bit of hesitation in his voice, William indicated that “several things were going well and that he was proud of that work.” Picking up on his friend’s less than enthusiastic response Wright asked, “Why only several things? ‘Well,’ William replied, ‘I’ve only just realized what my problem has been. Everybody in the company has a clear idea of how they want the chairman to act, what sort of meetings they think they need and so on. I’ve done my best to meet those expectations as far as possible. I’ve gone out of my way to learn the procedures they have in place. But I’ve figured out now that I’ve gone too far. I’ve let their expectations dictate the shape of my work, of how I spend my time. I now need to turn that inside out. I have my own ideas of what we should be doing, and from now on I’m going to set the pace.’

Wright observes, ‘...of course, a wise leader will want to listen carefully to those who know more about the company or an organization than he or she does. To this extent the example doesn’t quite fit what Paul is saying. But it does in this way: Paul appeals to us, that as followers of Jesus we should refuse to allow the *present age* to squeeze us into its mold, dictate how we should think and indeed what we should think, or tell us how we can and can’t behave. Instead, we are to be transformed; by the renewing of our minds. In all our relationships we have to set the pace ourselves, and work out what sort of people we should be. The basis for this is not what the surrounding culture expects of us, but what God in his mercy has done for us.’¹ In all our relationships, if we want to love well, it must be our relationship with Jesus, and what he has done for us in his cross and resurrection that defines the expectations and sets the pace. I can’t say that enough, and yet I also know how hard that is sometimes to do.

One of the key phrases for how we begin to understand the nature of our relationships and the life to which we are called as followers of Jesus comes right at the beginning of Paul’s instruction in Romans 12. Paul urges these early Christians to not be conformed to the “present age.” “Like many first-century Jews, Paul believed that world history was divided into ‘the present age’, characterized by rebellion against God and the corruption and death which result.” This is what I implied last week when I suggested that our tendency to neglect our relationship with God, to doubt God’s providential care, to fail to trust God with our lives, and believe that we can secure our own future leads us to bondage and death. That is our condition in the “present age”. But there is also for Paul, ‘the age to come’, in which God will give new life to the world, bringing justice, joy and peace once and for all. Part of the point of Paul’s gospel is his belief that this ‘age

¹ NT Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Romans*. p. 68.

to come' has already begun in Jesus through his death and resurrection."² The age to come has come. In other words, in and through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God's Kingdom on earth has already begun, and followers of Jesus are called to live into that new age here and now. Disciples of Christ must not allow their relationships to be conformed to this present age but transformed by the age to come.

"Christians are in the position, not exactly like an executive learning a new job, but of someone who needs to stop letting the world around us dictate its own terms and conditions, and who instead must figure out how to think, speak, act, and be in relationship as is appropriate not for the present age but for the new age which is already breaking in among us in Christ. Christians are called to be counter-cultural...or prepared to think through each aspect of life and relationship in light of the new age Christ has brought and begun. And so, we must be ready to challenge those parts where the present age shouts, or perhaps whispers seductively, that it would be easier and better to just do things *that way*, while the age to come, already begun in Jesus, insists that belonging to the new creation means that we must live *this way* instead."³

We are called, and expected, to live differently with others, to inhabit relationships in a very different way because of Jesus and how he lived and inhabited relationships. This includes relationships with friends, with family, with our brothers and sisters in Christ, with those whom we like and love *and* relationships with strangers and even our enemies. And this is not optional. There is no division between heart and life for a follower of Jesus. We can't claim that our hearts are right with God and then go out and live our lives and relate to others in ways that look unredeemed. That's hypocrisy. That is pretending to be something that we're not. The old patterns that defined relationships in this present age will no longer do. They are not pleasing to God and they run counter to the life of the Kingdom. So if we are worthy of the name Christian then we are to be "little Christs". Our lives and relationships should point others to Christ's life. We should look like him. The good news is, new life, in all our relationships, is made possible by the "structuring power of grace". (Achtmeier, 195) Grace makes it possible, indeed grace demands, for us to relate to others as Christ would.

And so, we are called to allow the Holy Spirit to renew our minds, to give us a new way of thinking about the world, seeing the world, describing what is going on in the world in order that we might then relate to the world and those around us in a way that reflects the mind and will of Jesus. Paul goes so far as to say that in all our relationships, in the way of life to which we have been called in Christ, we are to "present our bodies (by which he means the whole of who we are, body, mind and soul) we are to present ourselves as a living sacrifice to God."

² Wright, p. 68-69.

³ Wright, p. 69.

If we want to live as if the new age to come is among us, our whole lives are to be laid upon the altar like a sacrifice in the Temple. “The big difference is that, whereas in the Temple the sacrifice was there to be killed, our self-offering is actually all about coming alive with the new life that springs forth in unexpected ways once our old life has been put to death. The Christian life, holy and faithful relationships...begins with the glad offering of one’s whole self to God whose mercy and grace then give shape and structure to all our relationships.”⁴ In offering ourselves completely to God, God offers God’s self back to us filling us with the Spirit, transforming and renewing our minds until we see, and think, and act, and speak, and relate like Jesus. So what does that actually look like when we love and relate well like Jesus?

Well a couple of things, in the section of Romans 12 we did not read, Paul talks about our life together as Church, he begins with the Christian community. And he argues that our life together must be defined, among other things, by unity. Drawing upon the image of the body Paul urges us to be humble, regardless of our gifts and place within the body, we all must embody a spirit of humility being grateful for one another and the gifts that God has given. It is God who has assigned the various gifts and roles within the body. Just like with your physical body not every member of the Christ’s body, the Church, has the same function but all are necessary for the body to be well and whole. So how we relate to one another as Church matters because we are members one of another. Unity within the Church is not merely a helpful strategy for getting things done. Our unity, the way we relate to one another and love one another well as Christians, points to the age to come when in Christ all things will be one. Christian unity is a witness against the present age and all its divisions. It’s what Jesus prayed for when he asked the Father, “...that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” (John 17:21) Our unity matters – not unanimity, unity, oneness in Christ. The way we relate to one another matters. The way we argue, and debate, and discuss, and deal with difference matters because when the Church is divided it undermines our witness to the God who is one. So, we approach our life together with humility, being grateful for one another, not envious of each other’s gifts, and always remembering that if Christ has gathered us together as Church, and if he is Lord and head of the Church it is not ours to decide who among our brothers and sisters are worthy of our love. That, says, Paul would be like the hand saying to the eye “I have no need of you.” (1 Corinthians 12:21)

Then Paul turns his attention to how we love and relate well, not only with those inside the Church but also with those outside of the Christian community. So, I just want to read this and for us to hear Jesus speaking to us. No rationalizing, no trying to explain it or get to the real message behind Paul’s words, no excuses about how Paul doesn’t understand contemporary life. Here’s a man who spent much of his ministry in prison because he took seriously the offering of his life as a living sacrifice to God, who prayed daily for his mind to be renewed, and who allowed

⁴ Wright.

his relationships to be shaped by the age to come. In Eugene Peterson's translation, *The Message*, loving well, relating well, being transformed by the age to come, being Christian looks like this... "Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle. Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be spirited servants of the Lord, cheerfully expectant. Don't quit in hard times; pray all the harder. Give for the needs of the saints; offer hospitality to strangers. Bless your enemies; no cursing under your breath. Laugh with your happy friends when they're happy; share tears when they're down. Get along with each other; don't be stuck-up. Make friends with nobodies; don't be the great somebody. Don't hit back; discover beauty in everyone. If you've got it in you, get along with everybody. Don't insist on getting even; that's not for you to do. "Retribution is mine," says God. "I'll take care of it...If you see your enemy hungry, go buy that person lunch, or if he's thirsty, get him a drink. Your generosity will surprise him with goodness. Don't let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good." (Romans 12:9-21)

Our world, this present age needs that kind of Church. Not a Church that says it's the Church. Not a Church white-washed Church, not a Church that is little more than the Republican or Democratic Party at prayer. This present age demands a Church that in its witness, in its actual living of life looks like Jesus. So Paul says, "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God...Do not be conformed to this present age, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God - what is good, and acceptable, and perfect." Let's be that Church. Amen.