

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Reno, NV

Pastor Scott Trevithick

Date: September 3, 2023, Year A 14th Sunday after Pentecost

Text: Romans 12:9-21

Title: Living Out One's Faith

Focus: How do we authentically live out our faith? How do we assess new forms of ministry or expressions of faith? In a string of exhortations from Paul to the church at Rome, including the encouragement to "Let love be genuine," he offers guidance that may help us address such practical questions.

Epistle Reading: Epistle Reading Romans 12:9-21

⁹Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹²Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. ¹³Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. ¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. ¹⁷Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." ²⁰No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." ²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Scary or What? What did you think?

"I appeal to you therefore, . . . to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Romans 12:1).

Those were words that you read last week with Pastor Kate as you began the reading from Romans chapter 12. What do you think about that? Or, perhaps more pointedly, how does that *viscerally feel* when you hear that: "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice."

I can imagine that doesn't sound very appealing. It doesn't sound like fun. It doesn't sound like something you want to do. It sounds a bit daunting—even scary.

Last week, Pastor Kate preached from Romans 12:1-8 and talked about spiritual gifts. I want to continue in Romans today because today's designated Lectionary text is really Part 2 of what the Apostle Paul was saying last week. That opening verse, ". . . present your bodies as a living sacrifice. . ." functions as the introduction to the passage we read this morning as well. Verses 9 and following from day are connected to or a part of the same section as last week.

Despite that kind of intimidating or even scary start of the larger passage of chapter 12, I think this is about helping people discover what brings them joy.

Adapting to Changing Conditions and Assessing New Opportunities

Think of it this way: What do you do when you've lost a sense of direction?

Or when change comes and what seems to have been working in the past no longer seems to be working, what do you do? How do you adapt? How do you recognize a new opportunity—or, better yet, how do you create an opportunity when nothing seems available? And how is your faith a part of looking for or listening to that?

And these questions can apply to you as an individual or to a group that you're a part of like Good Shepherd as a congregation or to a work group or community group.

Living in the middle of change—such as in these scenarios—is usually uncomfortable—we'd rather be in a place of greater certainty or predictability. But that's where I think Paul's wisdom—urging us to present ourselves as a form of worship--and God's call come in.

Last week's reading and the focus of Kate's sermon were about spiritual gifts. Kate described the use and function and benefit of spiritual gifts. This week's scripture is a string of encouragements or exhortations to live in a certain way. While that, too, might sound like a drag, I think following it can lead us from this discomfort of being in a time of change or uncertainty to regaining a sense of direction or purpose.

If that sounds way too vague to follow, I want to make it specific by telling some stories which I think capture people's receptivity to God's call or direction in life in the midst of change that I think is in keeping with how Paul urges us to view our devotion to God as a form of worship or the way that he's directing people in this second part of the reading.

I want to tell you the inspiring stories of people who have responded to change or who have faithfully pursued what God called to them when the way was not clear. That word *inspiring* means “to breathe (or blow) into.”¹ It's a reminder of the activity of the Holy Spirit. The Hebrew and Greek words for spirit also mean *breath* or *wind*. The Spirit breathes life into us, like God the creator is described as breathing life into Adam.²

The inspiring stories I want to tell you are of:

- Pastor Richard, who is pastor of a downtown church.
- Pastor Brent, pastor of Christ Presbyterian Church in a suburb west of Chicago.
- Olivia, a 22-year-old college graduate and former barista
- Pastor Chad and Community Covenant Church

¹ Middle English *enspire*, from Old French *inspirer*, from Latin *inspirare* ‘breathe or blow into’ from *in-* ‘into’ + *spirare* ‘breathe’. The word was originally used of a divine or supernatural being, in the sense ‘impart a truth or idea to someone’.

² Genesis 2:7: “Then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.”

- Pastor Scott and Good Shepherd

Their stories could also be described as discovering your call. Or, as Pastor Kate talked about last week, their stories are also about discovering your gifts or the thing which gives you joy, which she called the thing that "makes us come alive."

Pastor Richard, pastor of a downtown church

Richard writes,³

I had an interesting insight last night. My church, a historic downtown church with a lovely garden, in the summer holds "beer and brats." This is part fellowship within the congregation, part outreach to make the community aware we exist, and of course part fundraiser. It is popular in the community, with office workers and local residents showing up en masse. I was the beer guy: the road to widespread popularity. The insight came when we began to tear down. The people still there spontaneously joined in: people I didn't know just automatically stacked chairs and [folded up] tables and carried them inside without being asked. This is not normal food service behavior. The polite thing in a restaurant when the staff begins cleaning up is to leave so they can get their work done. But it is absolutely normal church supper behavior, instilled at an early age. This suggests to me that these people grew up churched and like the social aspects. How to get them in the door on Sunday, when we are offering bread and wine rather than beer and brats? I have no clue.

Great story. Great outreach. Great response—he was amazed that people—guests—joined in and started carrying in tables and chairs. He wondered if they were "church people" and what a next step with them could be.

Pastor Richard posted this story to Facebook and invited comments and suggestions. I think it's an intriguing practical theology question—a fascinating mission question. What do you think? What would you do?

The comments were varied. Some offered specific suggestions for follow up:

- How easy is it to get more info? A QR code on every table could send them to the website or newsletter. How did they learn about brats & beer? A friend, a banner, a post on Instagram or Eventbrite? Do you advertise worship the same way?
- As a part of your beer and brats in the garden, do you provide information and opportunities for people to get involved with other outreach ministries of the congregation? You struck a nerve with people wanting to be helpful that seems to be the point of contact. How can you make people aware of other ways to get involved and get connected and not just Sunday morning?
- Get some prayer warriors praying. Then do something at another time once or twice a month (in the garden, weather permitting) like a happy hour with a quiet

³ Richard Hershberger posted this August 26, 2023, at the ELCA Facebook page.

word of reflection in the midst or better yet guide current members in listening skills and armed with great questions, letting them loose to talk with and listen to others' lives and answer with Jesus. People are longing to know Jesus; they just want to know without being thrown in to another commitment until they know that it is real.

- Keep experimenting! Just keep trying stuff and ask the Holy Spirit for help.
- Invite them. Show them the same hospitality, acceptance, and fellowship.

People affirmed what he and the church were doing and basically said, **“You’re living out the Gospel right there.”** Some cautioned him about doing something just to get people “in the door” on Sunday in way that could be perceived as manipulative. One person even called that a “bait and switch” tactic.

- Let them know you offer coffee hour on Sunday and roughly what time and let them know they’re welcome to join even if they can’t make the service. Take baby steps. It gives them permission to connect with members over food without a high-pressure push to fill a pew. If they start feeling connected, they may find themselves drawn to the service. It’s like when you’re a kid and you start playing with the kid down the street. You hang out in his yard for a while until you get to know him better. Then he invites you in to play video games. And then one day, he invites you to stay for family dinner. It’s an incremental thing.
- You are planting a seed and have the garden. God's timing not ours.
- Maybe the measure of success is not whether they come on Sunday morning.
- Change nothing!! Let the Holy Spirit do her work while you and your congregants provide a friendly atmosphere, absolutely NO evidence of proselytizing, letting people relax and be themselves in your presence. IMHO, this speaks volumes to your community. Don’t verbalize about services, etc. they already know or can easily find out. Patience! Let them come to you when they are moved to do so. Please don’t EVER make them think your wonderful brats and beer are a subtle lure to church or re-church them. People KNOW about the church. Let them marinate in your presence and friendliness.
- Another said, “I so agree. When visitors see relaxed members who are enjoying their church activities and truly appreciate meeting them, it is more of a lure than proselytizing ever could be.”
 - Another agreed: “THIS. Bait and switch is absolutely the wrong approach.”
- Perhaps the Beer and Brats is enough. Friendship, non-judgmental, conversation.
- Maybe you had the right idea all along. It’s not about them coming to worship. It’s about relationship. That’s the Gospel.
- Beer and brats is the church being church. We need to see more of this and less of the church being church in pews.
- Perhaps the real question is how to go to them where they are rather than getting them to come to us.
- Just continue to show the love of Christ. [I want to be] a church that cares more about people for who they are rather than what they can “do for us” (like take up a space on a pew).

- You are developing a relationship with them ... let it "brew" and come to life in its own time. Everyone will be on a different timeline for the next step. Let the Holy Spirit come and work in your midst.
- It's a well-received community touch point. Good for you!

Of course, Pastor Richard and leaders in that setting will need to sort out what's best for them, but I think there are some insightful comments here. In many of the comments, I hear echoes of what Paul says here in Romans as a primary way of displaying the Gospel **"Let love be genuine"** (Romans 12:9). As different commenters said, the good news is not about others occupying the pew, but having an experience of community which is a reflection of the love and grace of God.

Pastor Brent, pastor of Christ Presbyterian Church in North Riverside, a suburb west of Chicago.⁴

Pastor Brent served Christ Presbyterian for 5 years. He wept when he preached his final sermon there. Part of that loss was saying goodbye, but also, he said, because the church had dwindled down to 12 people. "I couldn't help but think I was a failure," he said, "even though I knew I wasn't."

What did he do next? With courage and faith, he pursued a dream to open a brewery. He had been home brewing for about six years and he saw the idea as an extension of his call to ministry. He believed the brewery would combine his passions for high-quality craft beer, fellowship and conversation, hospitality and community service.

"I felt like I could still be a pastor, but in a different way," he said, adding, "a lot of 20- and 30-somethings will walk into a brewery, but not a church."

He named his new business Burning Bush Brewery. "I love that God spoke to Moses in that way, and that Moses was faithful to God and his community," he said. "People feel comfortable in a brewery, so they naturally ask me about the name, which leads to conversations about their thoughts about God, or faith, that they might not have had otherwise."

He opened right before COVID hit, so that was a tough year, but he persevered. "It's been quite the ride. We didn't make a profit in our first year, but we didn't have a huge loss, either."

Olivia, a 22-year-old with a dream

This is Olivia, a 22-year-old graduate of St. Louis University, where she earned a degree in theology and also entrepreneurship. Her dream was to start a coffee shop where she could pay people well, buy from local suppliers and treat customers and her

⁴ Paul Seebeck. "The Rev. Brent Raska opens a brewery where faith is always on tap." Published May 16, 2023, at *Presbyterians Today*. <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/may-16-2023/>

staff like family. She had a business plan and barista skills from working her way through college. But she had no money.

- “The banks weren’t really looking to give a 22-year-old a big loan,” she said. “There weren’t also a lot of investors who were super interested in that either. I was stuck.”

Pastor Chad

This is Pastor Chad of Community Covenant Church. They had a problem common to thousands of churches around the country: an aging congregation, a shrinking budget, a too-big building that spent most of the week empty. And the clock was ticking with reserve funds dwindling.

- “We had about 22 months left,” said Pastor Chad.
- What would you do? What do you think they did?

Rather than wait for their reserves to run dry, church members decided to make the most of the time they had left. They sold the building to a local school, put the money in the bank and began praying for the future [while they continued as a worshiping community in a rented space.]

Meanwhile, former barista and 22-year-old graduate Olivia was praying and fasting herself.

After they learned about each other, church leaders sent an email to Olivia, and they met. After a long delay during the height of COVID, their partnership led to the founding of Teleo⁵ (teh-LEH-oh) Coffee in Kirkwood, Missouri.

The congregation is now known as Embrace Church. As a congregation, they rent space and meet for dinner church, a worship service centered around a meal. Their partnership with and investment in Olivia means that rather than owning a building that was empty most of the week, they’re part owners of a thriving space where people gather every day for conversation and friendship.

Pastor Scott and Good Shepherd

Many of those who commented to Pastor Richard, the pastor of the downtown church which was hosting Beer and Brats in their garden, talked about being attentive to the nudging of the Spirit. People encouraged them to pray about it, listen or be attentive to the Spirit, and show genuine concern or love for people rather than worry about getting them to sit in a pew on Sunday.

I think it was a gift of the Spirit and our receptivity to that kind of nudge that led to a “holy moment” or Good News story for me and others from Good Shepherd back in June.

We hosted a youth event at Huffaker Park. Good Shepherd youth and some siblings and parents had a good time together at a BBQ. We played Bocce Ball and

⁵ Greek: “It is finished, complete,” which is what Jesus said from the cross.

other games. The unexpected holy moment came when Katia asked about the leftover burgers and hot dogs. She pointed out the kids who were playing on the nearby basketball court. We invited them over to have a bite and hang out. The kids were of a variety of ages from elementary school to high school from the neighborhood. One kid said it was the first thing he ate all day. We talked and laughed together and I asked “Quiz Questions” about the state of Nevada and sports trivia. It was spontaneous and fun and felt like the Church being the Church.

- In a note to Katia and me, Dale said: Thank you for your open invitation and warmth to make that happen. It sounds weird, but quite frankly it was a big high for me last week. Like I told you this morning, I felt like I was witnessing "the church" actually being the church. It wasn't necessary to tell everyone "Hey look at us- we're from Good Shepherd in Reno. We'd love for you to come join us some Sunday." Instead, it was just kindness and generosity to those kids and engaging them in a way that I think they'll remember for a long time. And Scott - that is what you do best - extend a wide-open welcome to people and make them feel like they matter. And make it fun at the same time. It was just cool to watch and I thank you both.
- I said in reply: It was fun for me. An unexpected gift or a sign of grace. Or, as you say, Dale, the Church being the Church.

Closing

- “Present your bodies as a form of worship,” Paul writes.

While that initially sounds a bit scary, that intention and the receptivity to God’s Spirit that comes from it can help us to discover a sense of purpose and joy that is a gift.

- “Let love be genuine,” Paul writes a bit later.

That can be a guiding principle which leads us to pursue the Gospel rather than secondary goals.

What do you do if you’ve lost a sense of direction?

What do you do when conditions have changed and what worked in the past is not working in the same way?

The question might be as simple as, “What do we do with these extra hot dogs and hamburgers and chips?”

A receptivity to God’s Spirit and the intention to “Let love be genuine” may open the door to new opportunities to demonstrate God’s love. And that’s Good News.