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Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
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Romans 14: 1-12
Matthews 18: 21-35

THE PARABLE OF FORGIVENESS

Earlier in the book of Romans, Paul talks about wanting to do the right thing, that which is good. We talk about his wanting to choose the good but being unable to do that on his own, and only being able to choose that which is evil. It's as if he has two power sources in his life, and even this list of the characteristics of what it means to follow as a disciple of Christ is listed in a scheme that presumes another choice.

When he talks about hospitality and kindness—when he talks about returning a blessing for a curse—it's as if there's another choice. And in fact, if you read much of the Bible, you see that people had a choice that they often made, even in worship. If you go to the Psalms, it's pretty clear people enjoyed bringing down God's wrath on their enemies. They enjoyed calling on God to punish those who were oppressing them.

So when people have two sources of power, it's as if they are like the cars that are so popular now—the hybrids—the source of power which is based on their accomplishments and what they have been able to put together as a life plan and as a world view, and then another source of power which is completely different, which is other than that which they would construct on their own.

Many of you probably already own a hybrid. Some of you own them now. In fact, probably in our congregation because of our size, there's a greater percentage of hybrid owners than in most congregations. Hybrid cars use one of two sources of energy at any one given moment. I actually owned a hybrid before there was ever a Prius or a Camry hybrid. One summer B.C. (before children) when we were in seminary, we were asked to direct a camp at Old Fort, Camp Greer. The place was so big I was awarded a Moped. So I got to use pedal power and a gas engine—the first kind of hybrid.

There are lots of hybrids that we take for granted. They abound all around us. Most locomotives are pulled by a diesel engine that runs an electric motor. Giant mining trucks, those huge ones where the tires are bigger even than my truck, those are diesel/electric hybrids, also. Submarines: hybrids. They may be nuclear/electric or diesel/electric, but they are hybrids. And any vessel that combines two or more sources of power to achieve propulsion is by definition a hybrid.

And as it turns out, as Jesus disciples we also need to rely on a source of power other than that which is primary. In fact, we need to switch the source of power in our life which is primary. Remember when the bumper stickers came out that said, "God is my co-pilot."? Or the new one that has come out, "If God is your co-pilot, switch seats." We rely on a source of power that is meant to put into practice the attitude taught by Christ. When we have those attitudes and we seek to make them our primary choices—our first

choices—we are happier, we are more fulfilled. In this passage in Romans, Paul talks about loving one another in this community. And the word he uses is a love which is “unhypocritic.” A love which is unhypocritic, that strives on living in a unique way with one another.

When my children come home, no matter what they do, my goal in life now is to show them approval. We have such short amounts of time together, any foibles or little things they do that get on my nerves—like those half empty cans of pop, or whatever—any of those kinds of things that you thought you had taught them—when they happen the worst thing I can do is spend the whole time they are home correcting them. When their car runs out of gas, they don’t need me to tell them that there is a gauge in the car for a reason. When they leave the window down in a thunderstorm, they don’t need me to tell them that the car is going to smell funny now for a long, long time. The evil that I would perpetuate against them would be a lasting memory that they are not loved. That’s the worst thing I can do. That somehow, if they don’t perform up to standard, my conditional love for them can be chipped away.

Remember the first time you lost your child (unless you are a perfect parent and you’ve never wondered where the child is in the store or why they aren’t in the backyard where you left them), the first emotion you had when you saw that child wasn’t one of anger, (except maybe with yourself), it was an emotion of gratitude and thankfulness and all you wanted to do was run and embrace them the way the prodigal was embraced upon his return home. Yes, you wanted to correct them and say, “You can’t run away from me in the store.” But the first thought you had was, “Thank God you are safe, and I can put my hands upon them.”

A love in community, a koinonia community that is described in Romans, is a love which hates that which is evil. It’s a love which commits to doing that which is good. And I’ve said already, Paul says we can’t choose what’s good on our own. An unhypocritic love is the kind that offers caring and concern that we normally reserve for our immediate families. What if we were as careful in the way in which we spoke to one another on Sunday morning as we are or should be when our children come home from college or bring us back to reality when they return with our grandchildren?

The ancient Greek means “loving community” when it describes the church—the koinonia fellowship. Imagine being so connected to another person that you feel no sense of needing to talk or exalt yourself. Now Labor Day is a time when families get together. I wonder if you have the same issues in your extended families that we do. Sometimes when we are with all the nieces and cousins and in-laws and out-laws that gather for holidays, sometimes one of our family members will look at another and there will be this ever-so-slight wink. And in our family we know that means “Oh, we forgot; it’s all about them.” No matter what the conversation is, it’s going to come back to them talking about themselves.

Maybe you don't have these kinds of people in your family. But the Rushes and Jordans have lots of them. And no matter what is happening in our life—we can have a completely demolished townhouse that we're rebuilding—we'll still end up talking about what's going on in their life, where they replaced that patio stone in the back yard. Imagine being in community in such a way that all you wanted to do was bring honor to that other person's life. All you wanted to do was affirm their accomplishments. All you thought when you saw them was to let them know they were loved and accepted and there was nothing for which they couldn't be forgiven.

Paul talks about it in this way. Live in a manner which gives pride of place to those beyond our selves, esteem to those other than ourselves. Now if we ever want to live this kind of life—if we ever want to know what it is to truly have meaning, to be attuned to someone else in this manner—Paul says we have to live and recognize that only Christ is our reliable source of power.

I think hybrids are great. I look forward to the day when they can make a hybrid that can be used on the highway that can tow 10,000 lbs. of fertilizer when I want to or cross a river when I need to. I look forward to getting rid of that behemoth that I drive and getting a hybrid and having a smaller carbon footprint. But I know for the time being that when I need to use a truck for a truck purpose, for me right now there can only be one source. If you have ever been stranded in a river in a conventional gasoline vehicle, you know the joy of owning a diesel. It doesn't care if it gets wet. It doesn't have spark plugs that short out. Sure, you can drown one; but for the most part, you are safer when the water's high by driving something that relies on compression and not electricity.

Again I'm looking forward to that day when they make one that does both. Hybrid disciples certainly think of themselves but they have learned the power of thinking about other people first. It's hard to do that. That's why in the Old Testament, Leviticus just asked us to think of others with the same regard that we think of ourselves. Love your neighbor as yourself. But the New Testament, the covenant under which we live, says love others even more than yourself. Love them the way Christ has loved you. Love them with a sacrificial love, and that's what it means to take up your cross. It's to sacrifice what is easy for that which is more difficult.

I know some people think that bearing a cross means having the wrong color hair or not being tall enough or not being thin enough or not being rich enough. Those are not crosses, my friends; those are choices and those are opportunities. Crosses are those things which we choose knowing that they will benefit others and that the sacrifice which we make is born of the sacrifice which Christ makes. Giving thought to others before we speak. Wow! What a radical idea. Considering the impact of our words and what the person is actually going to hear before we share our great knowledge. Imagine the liberating power! Imagine the healing energy if we made those sources of power available; and, admittedly, we need to start in our own families—with those closest to us. But, imagine if our reputation as a congregation was one which did not think of its own first but thought of those who came into these walls hungry and thirsty.

There's a strange thing that happens in this passage. Somewhere along the line a scribe either became confused or enlightened, I'm not sure which; but as he was copying over the script, one scribe replaced the word for Lord, *kurios*, with the word for time, *khronos*. Just a slight misstep. When you read this passage and think about it, are we hear to serve the Lord? Most assuredly. And for that scribe, I wonder if serving the Lord meant seizing the opportunity. The time. That moment when they were called upon to do that which was good. That which was beyond what they would choose on their own. Serving the Lord and serving in any given moment of time requires that we never lose hope, that we are patient and prayerful, that love marks who we are more than being right.

Some have asked me what I really want to see happen here at Bush Hill Presbyterian Church. Someone even said, "If you just tell us what to do, we'll do it." But who are they kidding, right? More than anything else, I want us to discover and rediscover and recapture and remember and live again the definition of hospitality. And when I say that it sounds as if I don't think Bush Hill is hospitable (I think we're very hospitable), I just think it's a hard standard to rise to over and over again. And it's not, as we might think, our natural inclination. Our natural inclination when we go to a fellowship supper is to sit with people we know and love, who think like we do and who won't make us in any way feel uncomfortable.

But to be a truly hospitable church, we have to go to that person whom we do not know—who has not affirmed us, or who has actually offended us—and we have to find out more about one another. That's what Jesus means when he said those who would find life have to lose the life they think they have secured and figured out. Those who would know the giving up a burden have to take up the burden of his cross: a cross from which he received nothing, but gave the world everything; a cross that he would have liked to have side stepped—let this cup pass from me; a cross which he did not enjoy the thought of enduring; a cross which caused him to sweat, a perspiration that was like blood, in the garden.

Do we even know how to explain to our children to take up a cross and follow Christ? Do we know how to discuss it in our homes? What does it really mean to lose our life for Christ. If we cannot tell our children what it means, how can we place it into practice? If they cannot see it—this faith we cherish so much—every day in how we speak to them and how we include others in our life, how can they ever make it their own?

I think we are confused today because we think all we need is more information. All we think is that if we just knew a little bit more we could be the disciples Christ is asking us to be. We don't need more information. There is more than enough proof for all of our questions and doubts. What we lack is inspiration, and becoming infused completely with the courage and the power of Jesus Christ over our own will, our own choices. Becoming infused with that power requires in part a death—a death that we symbolize in our baptismal vows, and a death which we re-enact in the sacrament of the Lord's Sup-

per. These two sacraments, Baptism and the Lord's Supper, communicate that we must in fact die to self and rise to Christ every moment that we exist. And if we ever lose sight of that need, the power in our life, we will revert back to our old choices—our old way of living.

The vigilance required and the focus to let Christ's nature become our own is enormous. And quite frankly, I can't do it by myself. But you make it happen for me. You have in the past and you will again in the future. And I long for each of you the kind of joy I have received each time I felt you reaching beyond yourself and trying to be where I am. When you have listened to what I meant more than what I said. When you share that with one another the way you've shared it with me, this place will be electric. I like what a visitor said to me recently about Bush Hill. I know we can't write it into our mission statement, but boy, I'd love to. The visitor said, "Bush Hill's got spunk." Spunk. A new term for the Holy Spirit. I wonder how the committee on theology would feel about our replacing "the Holy Spirit" in the trinity with "spunk."

May that sense of God in our midst that some interpret as spunk – grow in our church.
Amen