

# How To Live In Community: a 'To Do' List

Romans 12:9-21    Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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August 31, 2014

I will always cherish the years I was actively engaged in youth ministry – before, during and after seminary. A highlight every year, for us youth group leaders as well as the youth themselves, was going on a week-long retreat to attend a youth conference. These were the kind of conferences with about 300-400 people, not unlike the Synod Youth Workshop that meets every year next door at the University of Tulsa.

For several years, I also volunteered to be a small group leader during the conference. Small groups were made up of a fairly random selection of about 10-15 youth, plus a couple of adult sponsors. At the very first gathering of the small group, we would start with a large sheet of newsprint and write down suggestions for a **group covenant**. The covenant was meant as **a way for each person in the group to agree how we were going to be in relationship together throughout the retreat**. A typical covenant would usually include things like:

- listen carefully to each other
- respect the right of each person to have their own opinions
- attend and participate fully in the activities of the week
- make everyone feel part of the group
- honor confidentiality of what is shared in the group setting
- I would always add 'have fun' to the list, if it wasn't already suggested.

When we were finished, each youth and adult sponsor would come forward and sign their name to the covenant. On the rare occasion that it proved necessary, I would remind the group of our agreed-upon covenant if things went too far outside the boundaries that were set.

Even though I don't think we, as a congregation, have ever gathered together and put something down in print, **our relationships here at College Hill are also guided by an unspoken group covenant**. And in a way, it includes many of those same items as at those youth conferences and retreats, with **an emphasis on mutual respect, dignity, and openness to differences of opinion**.

I'll return to this in a moment. Because at this time I want to attempt to make a connection with today's Epistle reading from Romans 12. We preachers call this the hermeneutical leap. What we have in this scripture passage is a list of items, written by the apostle Paul to the Christians in Rome, that in essence function brilliantly as a group covenant for that community, and in turn, for any gathering of people of faith. I like to refer to these verses, **Romans 12:9-21**, as a **"To Do" list for living together in authentic and genuine community**.

You may have noticed in your pew Bible that the NRSV translation gives this passage the heading, "Marks of the True Christian." In actuality, what it provides is **a window on what life in Christ looks like in community. Therefore, we can use it as a kind of measuring stick to see how well we are doing.** The very existence of this list indicates that the faith community in Rome was having a hard time living together in peace and unity. Hence Paul's instructions. While these exhortations can be applied to a family setting, Paul has written them expressly for life together as a community of faith – the church. I find this list *extremely* helpful in guiding any congregation, including ours, in right and mutual ways of living together in community.

One of the reasons I have included this passage as a bulletin insert is so you can take it home, and maybe even put it on your refrigerator, as I plan to do on our church refrigerator. I encourage you to refer to it often, especially during times of relationship difficulties. For just like in biblical times it's not so much a matter of *if* families and communities of faith will have occasional altercations, but rather what to do *when* situations of conflict flare up. In fact, paying attention to, and intentionally implementing these exhortations, may help minimize much contentiousness in the first place.

As we look at this list, two major themes emerge: first, the ways that Christians are to manifest genuine love (vv. 10-13), and second, the obligations that one has towards strangers and one's enemies (vv. 14-20). This list, by the way, flows from Paul's earlier statement in Chapter 12, which we looked at last Sunday, that we should not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing (changing) of our minds, so that we may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect (v. 2).

As an aside, while I was preparing for this sermon throughout this week, **I couldn't help but think about the sense of community, or lack thereof, in Ferguson, Missouri.** In the tragic aftermath of the shooting of an unarmed black youth, which included their law enforcement's militarized response, I wondered how all involved in that community setting might benefit by trying to live into Paul's exhortations for living together in peace, unity, and mutuality. That, in turn, made me think about **race relationships in our own community of Tulsa, and in our Kendall Whittier neighborhood.**

My thoughts also turned to our Presbyterian denomination, which is continuing to suffer from a lack of genuine community and trust, especially after our General Assembly voted to allow clergy to officiate at marriage ceremonies of same-gendered couples.

With all that and more in mind, let's look at the list. Paul's 'to do' list for living together in authentic community begins with the phrase, **"Let your love be genuine"** (v. 9). Not surprisingly, love stands at the very top of the list, for it is central to the rest of the entire passage. It provides, in fact, the context for Paul's other exhortations, which flesh-out what love means. (Paul does the same with the popular "love passage" in I Corinthians 13.)

What does Paul mean by the phrase 'genuine love'? It almost suggests that there can be ungentle love, which really isn't love at all. The Greek word translated as 'genuine' implies the following: **let your love for others be sincere – without pretense, without play-acting, without ulterior motives, and literally it means, without hypocrisy.**

One of the ways we love one another, Paul states, is with **mutual affection.** The word affection, in this context, means **true and honest caring for the well-being of one another.** Paul goes on to add that we are to rejoice with others who are rejoicing, and

weep with those who weep. Only **genuine empathy** for each other is what makes this possible.

**With authentic community, then, comes responsibility toward one another.**

Therefore, Paul also tell us to outdo one another in **showing honor**. How do you show honor to others in this congregation when we gather together. How do you show honor to those with whom you interact on a daily basis, including your family, those at work, or a complete stranger when you're out running errands?

Next, Paul tells us: "Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer" (vv. 11-12). There's an entire sermon, of course, in each one of these. And there are several other exhortations in this passage like: blessing those who curse us, associating with the lowly, being humble, and overcoming evil with good.

**I wonder how the reponse in Ferguson might have been different if folks on both sides of the conflict responded by blessing those who were cursing them, if they were more humble, and most importantly, if they chose to overcome the evil directed at them with good – instead of more evil and violence.**

I want to focus now on just one more exhortation in particular. I think the well-being of any congregation, or community, or even a nation itself, depends on it. The second half of Romans 12:13 commands us to: "**Extend hospitality to strangers.**"

**What is biblical hospitality?** It's way more than just a kind and casual, "Good morning, how are you? I'm glad you're here." While that part of it, that's only a beginning. **Genuine hospitality is a reaching out beyond ourselves, even our own comfort zone. It's a way of saying, "Everyone counts!"** That was a guiding principle during my youth ministry years, and it's a guiding principle in my life and ministry today!

Renowned author on Christian spirituality, **Henri Nouwen** wrote about the meaning of hospitality in his book, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*. In a discussion of the movement "From Hostility to Hospitality," Nouwen writes:

Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines. . .

Hospitality creates a friendly and safe space where strangers can enter and discover themselves as created free; free to sing their own songs, speak their own languages, dance their own dances; free also to leave and follow their own vocations.

We can apply all this here at College Hill in so many different ways. In a relatively literal way, this was initiated 6 years ago with the addition of our Spanish-language service of worship.

The question I would like for you to ponder this week is this: **How are you creating space in your own heart and life for others?** That's the first step in extending hospitality, especially to strangers. I think we need to remember this in our national debate concerning issues of immigration.

**Hospitality then, as a reflection of genuine love, along with authentic caring for the well-being of others, living in a spirit of hope, patience, humility and prayer, and overcoming evil with good, are among the most crucial items on any congregation's 'to**

**do' list in order to live in harmony, peace and unity.** It is necessary, even critical, in order to grow into authentic relationship with one another, here and out in the world.

So go forth this day to diligently seek to live together in authentic community – within your families, with your friends, as a congregation, as a neighborhood, as a city, as a nation, as a denomination, and as a global community. **And let us also keep broken communities in our thoughts and prayers.**

Amen.