

We're continuing our series, Making a Move, as we talk about equipping and serving. Serving applies when the church is gathered together in one place. But serving also applies to the church scattered as we are now. Serving applies in either setting because the foundation of serving is the idea that we are connected to one another.

Ironically, our current situation of isolation has stirred strong feelings of connectedness in us. Perhaps you have felt the challenge of being connected. You love your spouse or appreciate your roommate, but one week of non-stop connectedness, and you're ready for a break. If you're a parent, you love your kids, but you would give anything for school to reopen! Or perhaps this current season has stirred the longing for connection. Maybe you are by yourself, and this isolation has triggered heartache. Maybe you miss being face-to-face with friends.

I want to share three actions of serving that we can put into practice now, which will build a greater sense of connectedness. They are practices to serve when the church is gathered but also practices when the church is scattered. What I'm going to ask you to do at the end of our time is to choose one of the practices and put it into action this week. Perhaps you can practice it with someone in your home, or perhaps you get creative via technology. But if you practice one of these actions this week - if each of us did this as a community of faith - we will build a greater sense of connectedness with one another.

We're going to be in Romans 12, beginning in verse 9.

The Guiding Ethic

"Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good" (Romans 12:9). Before we get to the practices, we begin with the theme that sits under everything he is about to say: love. Sincere love is love without hypocrisy. A hypocrite pretends, or, as one commentator put it, "separates gradually." Love in such a way that binds you together with other people. Eugene Peterson, in his Message paraphrase, translates this verse, "love from the center of who you are." Love is the ethic that guides what Paul will say next about our relationships with one another. But how do we show love?

Paul has a list of actions to incorporate in our relationships with one another. I am going to pull out three practices from the list. Consider which of these three you could practice this week in serving others.

Pursue Hospitality

Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. vv. 10-13

The first practice is to "pursue hospitality." The word practice, in the original language, means to pursue someone. Two things about that are fascinating to me. First, it gives this idea of not just passively being available to be hospitable, but actively pursuing ways to express hospitality. Second, it widens the concept of hospitality. In Paul's day, hospitality was not simply having a friend over for a meal. To be hospitable meant that you publicly valued and identified with a person. For example, a person in prison for their belief in Jesus in Paul's day was dependent on the outside world for support. To visit a prisoner meant to declare to the ruling party that you aligned with the beliefs of the prisoner. It could have disastrous results (cf. Hebrews 10:34). To be hospitable was to declare that you were for one another.

This comes out in the word, honor, in verse 10. To honor someone means "to go before as a guide" (Vincent). It means that you lead the way by going out of your way to celebrate someone else. Hilary and I received a piece of advice when we were married that has stayed with us: find ways to out-serve one another. Lead the way. Don't lack in zeal. Set the standard in being for one another.

Discover Beauty

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. vv. 14-16

Harmony means to be of the same mind. Not agreement, but joining with people no matter their situation. The Message paraphrases the verse as "discover beauty in everyone." Be curious about people. Ask questions. Take notice of other people. Be interested in their story. Several years ago, Hilary and I took coaching training. Central to coaching is the practice of asking questions rather than telling advice. It is not a natural act. When was the last time you were genuinely interested in the story of

another person? Not so that you could add input but can listen and learn about another person?

Discovering beauty in another person is the only way that you can do what Paul describes in verses 14-15: bless, rejoice, and mourn. The interesting thing about each of these actions is that they are counter-intuitive. When someone persecutes us, our default is to retaliate. When another person rejoices, we default to jealousy. When someone suffers, we rush to offer advice. You're only going to bless, rejoice, and mourn with one another if you can see the beauty in people.

But not every interaction works out nicely. There will be times when hostility comes. How should you respond in that scenario?

Choose Grace

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. vv. 17-21

The third practice is to choose grace. When hostility comes, you have a choice of what you will give your energy to - evil or good. Either evil or good will win, and you have a choice of where you will give your energy. Evil overcomes when the pressure or pain of the moment leads you to act in ways that are outside of God's design. On the other hand, evil is overcome when you receive hostility but respond with good. When you do that, you choose grace.

That's what Paul means by "depends on you." When you receive hostility, you have a responsibility. Your responsibility is your response to the person and situation. You can't control what another person may say or do, but you can regulate your reactivity to them. Maturity is the ability to take responsibility for your emotional well-being. It means choosing to respond with something different than you received. When you do that, you set the stage for grace.

We see the need for grace in this current season of social isolation because distance makes it easier to dislike or harbor resentment against one another. For example, think about this first week of working from home. You've had colleagues that you worked well

with in the office, but now you are frustrated with your teammate who missed a conference call, or they are not producing what they usually would. Maybe you have found yourself more easily agitated with people that you often enjoyed. Now more than ever, you are aware that you get a choice of where you put your energy. Will you be overcome by the moment, or respond with grace?

Pursue hospitality. Discover beauty. Choose grace. But here's the important question that sits over this, that moves through this. Why? Why does this matter? Why does it matter that you pursue hospitality, discover beauty, or choose grace? It matters because we are designed for connection. When you act in these ways, you bring a picture of the grace of God to one another.

"But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved" (Eph. 2:4-5). This is how God acts toward you. In Jesus, He is for you. He sees beauty in you. His grace defeated the hostility of sin that kept you from a relationship with Him. He did all of this so that you can act in the same way toward one another. You are a recipient of grace so that you could serve others with a glimpse of the grace of God for them.

How will you serve this week?

As we close, take some time to discuss these practices. How can you pursue hospitality? What can you do to discover beauty in others? In what relationship do you need to choose grace? Choose one of these and put it into practice this week. It could be in your home or through a creative means to bridge the physical distance of our current reality. If you do, you will build a greater sense of connectedness with one another.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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