

## **Being Christian: Romans 12: 9-21**

**Good morning. I once was told that a pastor in Pottsville said to his congregation in a sermon on Sunday “Know the truth and it will make you weird.”**

**So, let’s get weird.**

**Today I want to talk about the epistle that Bob read this morning. If we take these words to heart, in our present society we will become weird. But it will be the weirdness of following Jesus. It will be the same weirdness he presented in his life and teachings in Israel 2,000 years ago.**

**Today’s epistle from Paul should sound very familiar to us. It contains all the elements of the commission that Jamie and I use each week when we end the service. We ask you to leave the church and be weird. So let’s unpack the weirdness.**

**In this epistle, Paul outlines some of the most important actions we are to remember about being Christian in the world. These were true 2,000 years ago, and these are true today and they will be true for your great-great grandchildren. Paul is giving us timeless principles that we are to live by.**

**Paul begins with love. “Love must be sincere.” It must be sincere, that is, that it must be not only something we feel in our heart but it must also be followed by actions that come from a loving heart. So, what would sincere love look like in action?**

**Paul tells us this in another letter, his epistle to the Corinthians. In Corinthians 13: 4-8 Paul tells us” Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.”**

**This is sincere love. I invite you to reflect on this set of verses that is often used at weddings. Love lasting a lifetime is a process that constantly renews itself. Paul gives us a beautiful formula for lasting love.**

Paul then goes on: "Hate what is evil; cling to what is good." So the issue here is: what is evil? I believe that God gives us free will to choose to do what is good or what is bad. How do we know what is good and what is bad?

I grew up as a little Roman Catholic kid. As children we were taught to do something called an examen of conscience each night. That meant we were to go through our day and see where we had sinned. We could all rattle off the 10 commandments when we were very young so I would go through them. When I was really young this could be quite amusing as I look back on it. So I would think: I did not worship a foreign god, I did not swear, I did not lie, steal, commit murder, commit adultery whatever that is, and I did not covet also whatever that is. So I was ok.

If only it were so simple as an adult.

But seriously, how are we to think about evil and sin? We are told in another letter, this time from James: "Therefore, to one who knows the right *thing* to do, and does not do it, to him it *is sin*." (James 4:17). As adults we need to continue to understand what is right and what is wrong since it becomes much more subtle. We might not have killed anyone today but did we kill their reputation by repeating gossip? We might not use God's name in vain but perhaps the language we use is not what a Christian should be using. I find that reading scripture and bible study with others helps me to think about good and bad in more concrete ways as an adult.

The second part of Paul's statement is also important: do we cling to that which is good? Do we put ourselves in positions where it would be easy to sin or do, we protect ourselves? Do we read and watch things that elevate us or that create anger in us? We should think about these things as Christians. They matter.

Paul then tells us to "Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice

**hospitality. 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. “ Paul is telling us how to live in Christian community with each other.**

**The early churches were tight communities because they needed each other to remain strong in following the teachings of Jesus and his disciples in a difficult world much like ours in many ways.**

**In our congregation we need to love, share, welcome, empathize and give peace to one another. In Paul’s world and in ours these were blessings not to be taken for granted. We need to acknowledge the power of Christian community to bring out the best in each of us and give us a place to find acceptance and care in a world that is often too busy or angry to care much about us.**

**And all must be welcome. This is not a closed club but an open fellowship and all are invited to this table set by Jesus. And why are we together? Paul again: “Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.” Our focus is on serving God in the world.**

**Let’s go on. “Bless those who persecute you” Now we are talking really weird. “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. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”**

**In our culture right now, this seems more than a little naïve. Turn on any source of news and you will see how weird what Paul is asking us to be. Totally countercultural. Impossible and just stupid. Get them first before they get you is our cultural motto.**

**But kindness and love can change lives.**

**Let me tell you a story I took from a local newspaper in Lincoln Nebraska, the Lincoln Journal Star, in a story by Cindy Lang-Kubick. It is a story about a Jewish family, the Weissers, that move into their Lincoln community from New York in 1988. The father came to serve in the local Jewish temple. In time they started to receive phone calls from a man who threatened the family because they were Jewish. *"You'll be sorry you ever moved into that house, Jew Boy."* *"The KKK is watching you, Scum."***

**Mr. Weisser called the police when he started to receive hate literature in their mailbox. Mr. Weisser knew the identity of the man who was persecuting his family and he knew something of his background. Mr. Trapp was handicapped and lived in his wheelchair. He was known as a Klan member and neo-Nazi and known for other hate attacks on individuals and groups.**

**Mr. Weisser decided to act. He started leaving his own messages on Mr. Trapp's phone each week. He called them love notes. *"Why do you hate me? You don't even know me. Don't you want people to love you? Don't you want to be a different person? You're disabled. Don't you know the Nazis would have killed you first?"* *"Do you need a ride to the grocery store?"***

**Finally, Mr. Trapp called back telling him to stop harassing him. Mr. Weisser said he just wanted to talk to him. One night they began to talk. Eventually Mr. Trapp said he wanted things to be different but he did not know how to do it. He asked Mr. Weisser to come to his home.**

**When Mr. Weisser arrived, he was greeted at the door by a man in a wheelchair with a few guns in his lap. That night their real conversations began.**

**After a time, Mr. Weisser invited Mr. Trapp into his own home to live. His illnesses were getting worse. Mr. Trapp quit all the hate organizations, and apologized to those he had persecuted in the past. He lived with the Weissers until he died of diabetes. He had converted to Judaism and is buried in a Jewish cemetery.**

**What an example of love and kindness changing a life. How very weird: to reach out like that. We may not need to take the risks Mr. Weisser took but perhaps we can risk listening to another who we do not agree with. Not judging others but being able to have conversations that focus on what we share in common. Seeking peace.**

**Wow. These verses are filled with weirdness and wonder.**

**Let me review all the instructions from Paul in this epistle that tell us how to be a good Christian, if weird, Christian in today's world.**

**Paul's main points are:**

**Love sincerely not just with fancy words but with all our actions.**

**Be good and avoid evil. Take good spiritual care of yourself.**

**Be devoted to one another. A community of faith matters. Christianity is a loving, supportive, welcoming faith.**

**Serve the Lord in this world. We are God's hands in the world.**

**Love those who are your enemy. Hate breeds hate and love breeds love.**

**I encourage you to spend time with these verses. Paul wrote this letter for all Christians in all times. And today we can certainly find guidance in his wisdom.**

**May God bless us all with the will and wisdom to follow in Jesus's way today and all days. Amen.**