

HOLD FAST TO WHAT IS GOOD

ROMANS 12:9-21

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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We have arrived at the last Sunday of summer. The days are growing shorter and cooler, kids and teachers go back to school in a few days. For many of us, this means the end of laid back schedules, the end of sleeping a bit later, the end of not having as many places to be.

Perhaps most importantly (and tragically), this means the last Sunday of snacks after church ☺.

On this, the last Sunday of summer, I am thinking about lists.

There are back to school lists for my kids. Pens, pencils, calculators, paper, binders... This is the list that will get the kids ready for a new school year.

Many of us keep lists on something like this, too [*iPhone*]. Every day, I have a list of reminders on this little device that beep and buzz at me all day long. This is how I keep track of the things that need to be done each day, whose call I need to return, which writing assignment I need to get started on, who I'm meeting later in the day, which kid needs to be picked up where and when... This list keeps me sane and helps me not to forget important things.

Many of us keep lists like this, whether on our computers or actual paper. We do this for our personal lives, for work, and for church life.

Lists are important. They help us to stay organized. They help us to preserve at least the *illusion* that we are on top of things, that we are managing, that we are in control.

Lists help us to set priorities, to decide what needs to be done when. They help us to evaluate the progress we are making on a task or set of tasks.

Today's text is a kind of list, too. We could think of it as end-of-summer, heading into fall, taking inventory kind of list. It is a list of what behaviours and dispositions characterize—or *ought* to characterize—a follower of Jesus.

Many of your bibles might even label this passage something like, “The Marks of a True Christian.”

I don't like this description because it implies that those who fall short of the ideals that this list holds up (i.e., *all* of us) are somehow *less* than true Christians.

But the things that Paul describes in our text this morning *should* describe the direction that all of us are leaning, the way we are pointed, the target we are aiming for on the journey of faith.

We're going to look at this list in more detail, but first I want to talk about a concept that I've mentioned before in sermons here, one that helps me as I think about what and how we should act and think and *live* as Christians.

(Parts of this sermon might seem familiar because I used them in a sermon two years ago, but a bit of review is ok, right? ☺)

It's actually not so much a concept but a phrase that I first encountered during series of lectures at Regent College by the OT scholar Walter Brueggemann.

In speaking about the people of Israel's dramatic exodus from Egypt and the long, complex story that followed, Brueggemann said this:

The life of faith is, in many ways, about “learning the sacred art of departing.” It is about learning how to leave the dominant narratives of our culture.

The sacred art of departing.

What does this mean?

Well, Brueggemann lives and breathes the Old Testament, so his focus was always on the people of Israel. For *Israel*, “the sacred art of departing” meant leaving the story of Egypt—a story of oppression and injustice and slavery and dehumanizing conditions and idolatry—and following God into the future.

It meant learning how to live according to a *new story*—learning how to trust and live in community, how to resist the lure of idolatry in all its forms, how to worship, what it meant to be a “blessing to the nations.”

Of course, this “sacred departing” didn’t always go very well.

Israel struggled and sinned and longed for the imagined security and relative comfort of Egypt. They had short memories, as so many of us do, when God places us in challenging circumstances.

They chafed under their leaders and complained against God. They *constantly* wandered off after other gods. They were forced to wander in the desert for forty years and, many years later when they were in the land, they suffered exile at the hands of a variety of foreign empires.

Israel struggled with the sacred art of departing—they could never fully leave or resist the temptations of other stories, other homes.

Of course the question is always put to us, too. How is *our* departing going?

I think our text from Romans today gives us a compelling picture—a list—of what a good departure looks like.

It is a text about the proper shape of the Christian life—a text that challenges the assumptions, behaviours and dispositions common to our twenty-first century context, a text that calls us to leave one way of looking at and living in the world embrace a different one.

Let’s have a look at this list, keeping in mind the theme of a “sacred departure” from the assumptions of our culture as we embrace the way of Jesus.

According to the way I have divided up the passage, there are twelve items on our list:

- 12:9—***Let love be genuine***... In a culture of falsity and superficiality, a culture which places more value on the images we portray than our character, a culture where love is fleeting and self-serving... Be genuine. Love openly, with the interests of others in mind.
- 12:9—***Hate what is evil and hold fast to what is good***... In a culture that so often exalts what is evil—what is violent and degrading and dehumanizing—and mocks purity and holiness what is good as antiquated and irrelevant.

- 12:10—***Outdo one another in showing honour***... in a culture where “honour” is based on celebrity, and must be constantly earned—give it freely, as a gift.
- 12:10—***Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in Spirit, serve the Lord***. In a culture of apathy, sloth, and ever-decreasing attention spans, we must continue to look for ways serve Christ and one another. There are many things that need to be done in the life of the church. We need to remember that being a part of a church is never about being *spectators*, but *participants* in what God is doing in and through us. There are always opportunities to volunteer—teach Sunday School, be a host family to a volunteer, contribute your musical gifts...
- 12:12—***Rejoice in hope... be patient in suffering... persevere in prayer***... We live in a cultural context characterized by many who are too cynical to hope, too impatient to suffer, and too jaded to pray. Are we different? Are we people of joy, patience, and perseverance, through all kinds of circumstances?
- 12:13—***Extend hospitality to strangers***... In a global context of increasing fear and xenophobia, increasing suspicion of “the other,” we are to be people of profound generosity and warm hospitality. Our default ought to be to see people as neighbours, not threat or burdens on our time and resources.
- 12:14—***Bless those who persecute you—do not curse them***... This is a hard one—especially in a cultural context that glorifies violence and retaliation, and whose popular culture—from sports like “Ultimate” Fighting to television and movies—is saturated with brutality.
- 12:15—***Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep***—Enter into the joy and the pain of human existence... in a culture that fosters isolationism and detachment from life-sustaining community. I had an opportunity to do this last week at the funeral of Kennady Clarke. It was profoundly difficult, as many of you who have walked through tragedy know very well, but it also felt like meaningful and significant work because we were created to need one another, whether in celebration or in mourning.
- 12:16—***Live in harmony... associate with the lowly... don't be haughty***... Don't buy into the adversarial climate that is all around us, whether in politics or church disputes or whatever. Seek harmony. Don't only hang around people who are like you, whether this is socioeconomically or ideologically or whatever.
- 12:16—***Do not claim to be wiser than you are***... Be humble. Acknowledge what you don't know. One of my former professors told us once that one of the main goals of higher education was to teach us what we *don't* know. I think he was right. But we aren't always very good at acknowledging this.
- 12:17—***Do not repay evil for evil***... in a culture where “an eye for an eye”—or even an arm and a leg and an ear for an eye—is assumed—a culture where military spending dwarfs money spent on education and healthcare. Refuse to participate in this dead-end cycle that literally never ends.

- 12:19—*Do not avenge... leave room for God...* Trust God with the future.

Our whole passage this morning could be summed up in the final verse:

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good (12:21).

I think that for Paul's first readers in Rome, as well as for us, each of these items on this list presents us with a choice between two narratives of how the world works and what a human being is for.

The life of sacred *departure* that we called to is about daily decisions, daily habits, daily commitments to leave behind the dominant narrative of our culture for the true narrative of who we are, what we were made for, and where this whole story that we are *all* a part of is going.

I don't think that Paul is naïve. I think that Paul knows exactly how this list flies in the face of "how the world really works."

But Paul is not urging this list upon us as a strategy for making the best of the world as it is; rather, he is telling us what the way of Jesus looks like in the world, and how our living of this story is one of the ways in which God is making all things new.

The question is not, "does living according to a list like this 'work' in a fallen world?" Sometimes it does, sometimes it doesn't.

On an individual level, I am convinced that the way of life that Paul is advocating here will make us more fulfilled, more mature, more attentive, more loving and hopeful than the narrative from which we are departing.

But the decision to choose this list as our "operating manual" will not magically end wars, or fix society or cause those around us to behave as we would like them to.

Sometimes living like this will mean that we are ridiculed as naïve or idealistic. Sometimes our generosity will be taken advantage of. Sometimes blessing those who persecute us will simply invite more persecution. Sometimes God's judgment will seem to slow in coming to our aid.

Sometimes evil will seem to flourish unchecked all around us, even as we hold fast to what is good.

Rather than, “does this list work?” we need to ask questions like,

- What does a truly human life look like?
- What is the future to which we are called?
- What role do you and I—the body of Christ—have to play in representing this future now?

Perhaps this list sounds daunting. Impossible even.

And it *is*, from a purely human perspective. None of us can live like this through the force of our own will and determination.

We must always remember the words Paul speaks elsewhere, in Philippians 2:

12 Therefore, my dear friends... continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, **13** *for it is God who works in you* to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.

The life of faith is always a life of synergy—we work, God works in and through us, and we are gradually conformed to the image of Christ.

So as we head out into fall, as we leave summer behind, as familiar rhythms and routines begin to take over our days, my prayer is that we will keep this list from Romans 12 ever before us. Put it on your fridge, read it over at the beginning of each week or each day, or read it at the end of the day and ask, “How did I make out with this list today?”

Whatever method you prefer, or whether or not this specific text is one that you are drawn to (there are other lists in Scripture too, of course—the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7, or the list of the fruits of the spirit in Galatians 5, or the “love is” portion of 1 Corinthians 13), I think we all need these kinds of reminders before us. *This is what I am aiming for, this is what I was **made** for, this is what God is calling me to.*

May God help us to learn and practice and delight in the sacred art of departing—leaving what is easy and what often comes naturally and *holding fast to what is good.*

For the sake of the God who made us, and for the sake of the world he loves.

Amen.

