

The Glue that Binds

BROKEN: Good News for Tough Times

Romans 12:9-21 Year A

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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/the-glue-that-binds/

In 2009, I traveled to East Africa to visit one of our former First Baptist young adults. Kristen Vogel had worked a couple of years in Uganda with a non-profit organization, and her time of service was ending soon. Before that happened, I wanted to see first-hand what she had been a part of there. On that trip, Kristen introduced me to a group she worked closely with called the Cornerstone Leadership Academy.

Cornerstone Academies are advanced-level boarding schools for high school students in Uganda, Tanzania, and Rwanda. Their mission is to create life-transforming learning environments that mold young men and women from disadvantaged backgrounds into future leaders in their countries, leaders whose lives reflect the character qualities and leadership principles embodied in the life of Jesus.

I toured one of the academies and attended their weekly staff meeting. What impressed me most is that in each country they operate within, they intentionally take in young men and women from different tribes and religious backgrounds within that country. When placed into their dorms, Cornerstone deliberately mixes the tribes and religions, forcing them to live as a family at school. They eat together, live together, study, and play together. This is part of Cornerstone's intentional effort towards a new generation of leaders who will hopefully transcend the ethnic and religious biases that have created conflict and violence in their countries throughout the years, made more complicated and inflamed by years of colonialism.

Cornerstone is not asking these young people to change or deny their heritage, culture, or tribal affiliation. Those things are still celebrated and honored. Instead, they teach these future leaders that the tribe they belong to is not the most important thing about them, nor is it the most essential thing about others. What matters most is their humanity – others and their own. They teach these young people to appreciate and respect the diversity of the other without feeling threatened, less than, or fearful. They instill in them that the future well-being of their communities, countries, and the global community will be better when they remember they are bound together.

In his 1987 installation service as the archbishop of Cape Town, South Africa, Desmond Tutu said the following in his sermon, "If we could but recognize our common humanity, that we do belong together, that our destinies are bound up in one another's, that we can be free only together, that we can be human only together, then a South Africa would come into being where all of us lived harmoniously together as members of one family, the human family, God's family."ⁱ

Archbishop Tutu and the leaders of Cornerstone Leadership Academy witnessed first-hand in their beloved countries the horrendous violence, pain, hatred, and oppression that resulted from the devaluing and demonization of the other.

When Cornerstone began its story in 1994, it gave birth to a different kind of school they hope will address generations of brokenness in East Africa and beyond. How do they plan to do this? By uniting a diverse group of people around the way of Jesus.

When the early Christian church began its story in the first century, it gave birth to a new kind of faith community they hoped would address generations of brokenness in their communities and beyond. How did they plan to do this? By uniting a diverse group of people around the way of Jesus.

In this sermon series, *Broken: Good News for Troubled Times*, we've looked at various passages from Paul's letter to the believers in Rome as a lens to address the brokenness of our world. Paul sent this letter to guide them as they tried to figure out how to be this new kind of inclusive faith community living in a deeply segregated society. Jesus had entered our world, tearing down walls, barriers, and divisions between us, God, and one another. His church was to continue to do the same, but it was hard.

When I think about those early days of the church, I think of the work of Cornerstone Academy, trying to unite people from different groups, even opposing groups, around a shared mission. Through his teaching, letters, and co-laborers, Paul guided this new experiment of the early Christian church, which gathered different tribes and cultures and made them one family. Nationalities weren't denied. Instead, they were reprioritized as secondary to citizenship in the kingdom of God. Paul taught them to respect diversity without feeling threatened, less than, or fearful of the other. The future well-being of their communities, countries, and the global community would be better when they remember they are bound together in love through Jesus Christ for the glory of God and the good of the world.

Time will tell about Cornerstone's long-term impact as its graduates are sent out to influence their communities. But we've got over 1,900 years to evaluate the Church's impact. In those years, the global Church has accomplished miraculous things through the work of the Holy Spirit, empowering God's people. Throughout its long history, the Church has been a significant source of social services like education and medical care, an inspiration for art, culture, and philosophy, and the motivator for countless good initiatives, large and small, known and unknown. The message of Christ has been shared far and wide, and numbers beyond measure have come to experience the peace of God through faith in Jesus Christ because of the Church's faithful witness. But the Church has also contributed significantly to the brokenness. I don't think it is unfair to say the Church may be known more today for the brokenness than the good.

For much of his letter to the Romans, Paul makes clear the cause of this brokenness is sin. Not our individual moral failings so much, but something more profound – our separation from God and each other, our self-serving attitudes that focus on our wants and desires rather than the needs of our neighbors, our tendency to circle up to exclude rather than open up to include.

But thankfully, Paul also shows us the cure for our brokenness. There is a glue that binds what is broken, and it is love, the agape love of God, which is seen through Christ. A sacrificial, self-giving love that crosses borders, heals divisions, and stretches to the margins. A love that does not depend on us or our faithfulness but in which we can put our trust. A love that has been freely given to us and to all people and from which nothing can ever separate us.

Paul spent the first eleven chapters of Romans making the case that, regardless of tribe, all are sinners who need salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. All are welcome to Christ's table. Jews and Greeks. Hutus and Tutsis of Rwanda. Sukuma and Nwamezi of Tanzania. Baganda and Acholi of Uganda. Christ has thrown open the doors to all who call upon the name of the Lord.

Now, in chapter twelve, after assuring us of God's transformational love that can and will change the world, Paul writes about living the Christian life in response to God's mercy, in response to the love we have received. That is why chapter 12 begins with the word "Therefore."

In its most basic sense, the word "therefore" simply means "for that reason." When we see "therefore," we should ask, "What's the "therefore" there for." I'm glad you asked.

After everything Paul has told us about our sin, the brokenness of the world, and how God's love is working to overcome it all, FOR THAT REASON, IN RESPONSE TO God's gift of grace to us through Christ, Paul urges us, therefore, to "present our bodies as a living sacrifice" – a gift back to God that is active and engaged in the world, ready to embody the love that we have been given. Paul urges us not to be conformed to this world, to its hopelessness, to its injustice, to its brokenness, but to be transformed by the love of God and the renewing of our minds. And when God's love changes you, this is how you'll live, according to Paul in chapter 12. Living this way will both be part of your transformation and the result of your transformation.

Verse 9 starts with a command that is simple in words but profound in meaning: "Let love be genuine." *Let love be genuine; hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal; be ardent in spirit; serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction; persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; pursue hospitality to strangers.* (v.9-13) Our love is to be authentic, not hypocritical or superficial. As followers of Christ, our love should be marked by compassion, empathy, and selflessness, not just in words but in action, showing hospitality, humility, and a willingness to serve one another.

But is this even possible? The Roman church was much bigger and more diverse ethnically, culturally, racially, and theologically than many other churches Paul planted or wrote to. More house churches in Rome met separately with their settled views and opinions. Servants and masters were included. Women and men were included. People of means and people of no standing were included. Different dialects, worship songs, and ways of doing things. ⁱⁱ It would have been easy to fuss, disagree, and be suspicious of each other. Instead, Paul says they were

to honor one another, share in each other's burdens, welcome the stranger, and respond to evil with goodness. It sounds almost like a magical, utopian place, doesn't it?

A common summer vacation destination is the magical place of Disney World in Florida. One of the popular parks at Disney is Epcot. When you hear the word "Epcot," you probably immediately think of a giant golf-ball-like structure at the entrance of this park. But do you know what EPCOT stands for? It's an acronym: Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow. That's a weird name for a theme park, right? But that is because, at its very beginnings, Epcot wasn't supposed to be a theme park but, instead, a real community. In the late 1950s and early '60s, Disneyland in California had been up and running for a few years. Walt Disney, the founder, became fascinated by the American city and had been floating the idea of a utopian community where engineers, inventors, and creative types would work and live together, sharing ideas to help usher in a better future. The "Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow," Walt's passion project, would be a significant part of the new Florida park opening in 1971. Walt envisioned a genuine city devoid of crime, unemployment, and pesky automobiles that produced traffic and pollution. People would live in it, and guests could also visit it. It was like reality TV before reality TV and without the TV.

But then Walt died; the executives weren't keen on the idea and unsure how it would even work. Disney World opened in 1971, and EPCOT was moved to the back burner until 1982, when it opened, not as a utopian city where people lived and worked together but as a theme park focused on innovation and technology. EPCOT was birthed as an experiment to show the world what was possible. In some ways, it retains that purpose still today.

Isn't that the church? An experiment to show off to the world what is possible, what the kingdom of God here and now could look like if we work and live together, sharing in the work to usher in a better future? EPCOT may have Disney magic, but that wasn't enough to create such a community.

But we have something more powerful, more real than Disney magic. We have love, and Paul asserts that if Christians allow agape love to govern all our interactions with others, then we can be the community Christ calls us to be, not perfectly, for we still struggle with sin, as Paul said throughout the letter. But that doesn't mean we quit working towards this dream here and now. Given God's mercy toward us, Paul says it is our spiritual act of worship to live lives of love the way God has loved us. And we trust God with the rest.

I love to go on the road with Steve Hartman. Steve is a storyteller with CBS, traveling around the US, sharing positive, uplifting stories of humanity at its best. Each Friday night, a new episode of his segment, On the Road, airs near the end of the CBS Evening News.

In February this year, Steve told a heartwarming story of kindness from a little town in Alabama. It all started about ten years ago when an anonymous man approached a local pharmacist and asked if there were people who couldn't afford their prescription medications. When she confirmed that this was a common issue, the man handed her a \$100 bill with three simple

conditions: she couldn't tell anyone he was the donor; he didn't want to know anything about the recipients; and she was to tell each recipient it was a blessing from God.

This anonymous benefactor continued to donate \$100 bills for over ten years to help those who struggled to pay for their prescriptions.

For years, the identity of the donor remained a secret until his death this past year, when his story was revealed by his children, who learned only of his generosity right before his death. The man's name was Hody Childress, an Air Force veteran and farmer. Childress was described as a man with a rich heart, although not wealthy in terms of material wealth. Over the years, he spent over \$10,000 to assist others in his town with prescription costs.

Childress's kindness inspired people to donate and establish similar funds in their pharmacies.

What impressed me most about this story was not Mr. Childress's generosity, although he was most certainly generous. It was not his desire to remain anonymous, which is indeed impressive when most of us tend to want recognition. What impressed me most was his request not to know anything about the recipients. He did ask to assess their need or judge their worth. He didn't ask if they were foolish with their money, deserving, or believed in God. Mr. Childress simply did what he knew he could do, which was given God's generous mercy to him, to be generous to others as an act of worship, and to trust God with the rest.

Paul sets a high bar regarding love in chapter twelve. But remember, Paul has personally undergone this transformation because of Christ. When we first meet Paul, he is quick and enthusiastic to judge and legally persecute those he regards as enemies. He was willing to use force to advance his agenda against those threatening what he believed to be true. But then the love of God in Christ Jesus called him to repentance and transformed Paul from a young hothead to a seasoned advocate for love. This is the Paul who now tells us if you see your enemy hungry, buy that person lunch, or if he's thirsty, get him a drink. Because of God's mercy, Paul's life is transformed forever, and genuine, sacrificial love is now his spiritual act of worship. And if Christ can do that in Paul, just maybe he can do that in your enemy, or even better, perhaps he can do that in us.

Yet, Paul knows he cannot transform the world himself. That will take a community. Romans 12's calls to action on how to live are plural in their meaning. Biblical scholar Mary Hinkle Shore suggests that Paul is saying with his grammar, 'Don't try this alone.'ⁱⁱⁱ Jesus began a great community experiment we call the Church to show the world what is possible and what the kingdom of God here and now could look like if we live lives of love, but we need Christ and one another to accomplish it.

The founders of Cornerstone believe genuine love can heal the brokenness and division in their countries. They are raising the next generation of diverse leaders in East Africa in the ways of Jesus to see what Love can do.

At this church, we believe genuine love can be good news for our troubled times. We believe genuine love can heal brokenness. We believe diverse people the world seeks to divide can unite in the ways of Jesus to see what Love can do.

Given God's mercy and embracing what God has done for us, we take our everyday, ordinary lives and place them before God as an offering. We learn to love from the center of who we are, trusting God with the rest, believing that living this way will transform us and others for the glory of God and the good of the world.

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All scripture quoted is from the NRSVUE unless otherwise noted.

ⁱ <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1986-09-10-me-13333-story.html>

ⁱⁱ Wright, N.T (2018). *Paul: A Biography*. HarperOne pp. 321-323.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2023-08-28/romans-129-21-3/>