

Sermon Note: Local & Connexional

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Introduction

This is week two of “Knowing Who We Are,” six weeks on the Wesleyan way of grace. Last Sunday we started with the grace we receive from God. This week we look at the people God puts us among.

Methodists spell connexion with an x because that's how Wesley spelled it, and we keep this spelling to remember that we are connected to one another even back into our own tradition. La Jolla UMC isn't on its own! We belong to the California-Pacific Annual Conference, and that Conference to a church spread around the world. We can think of that as logistics and structure, and we can look beyond those to see that we are connected in love.

Illustration Video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lu8mMIkbHCo>

In this clip from *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), representatives of separate peoples are summoned to a council at Rivendell and asked to decide what to do about the ring of power.

Why This Video?

In this early scene from *The Lord of the Rings*, none of these characters chose each other. They disagree, they have competing interests, and several arrive with deep-seated grievances. Even so, they commit to work together in spite of these differences. Frodo is the first to step forward, even though he doesn't know the way, and even though he doesn't know the burden he will carry. Together, they form a common bond for a common journey.

Video Discussion Questions

1. Elrond tells the Council, "You will unite or you will fall." What do you think the people in that room hear in those words? Would you have believed him?
2. The Council argues deeply. What do you think the arguing accomplishes? Could they have reached the same decision without arguing?
3. Boromir wants to use the ring in spite of the dangers, and he points to what they have already sacrificed for everyone else. Do you understand where Boromir is coming from? Where have you heard a version of that argument?
4. Frodo volunteers, even though he doesn't know the way. What do you think it takes to say yes to something before you know how to do it?
5. Each pledge is spoken out loud, one at a time, in front of the whole Council. Does speaking a promise out loud give it any further significance? If so, what?
6. There is clear division among the members of the Council. When have you been joined to people you wouldn't have picked? What happened?
7. The clip ends with Boromir telling Frodo that the fate of them all rests with him. What do you think hearing that means for Frodo? What might it mean for the others who have promised to go with him?

Romans 12:9-21 (NRSVue)

⁹Let love be genuine; hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹Do not lag in zeal; be ardent in spirit; serve the Lord. ¹²Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction; persevere in prayer. ¹³Contribute to the needs of the saints; pursue hospitality to strangers.

¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep. ¹⁶Live in harmony with one another; do not be arrogant, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. ¹⁷Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, says the Lord." ²⁰Instead, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink, for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." ²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Scripture Study Questions

1. This section of Paul's letter to Rome begins with "Let love be genuine." What do you think genuine love looks like? Does it look the same in your home as it does in the church, in the grocery store, in traffic? What might make love look like it's not genuine in some of those spaces?
2. In verse 10, Paul asks us to outdo one another in showing honor. What does it mean to compete at honoring people? Where have you seen someone do this well?
3. Paul continues, "Contribute to the needs of the saints; pursue hospitality to strangers" (v. 13). One of those practices serves people we already know, and the other serves people we don't know. Which comes more easily to you, and why?
4. "Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep" (v. 15). Which of these is harder for you? When has someone rejoiced or wept for you?
5. In verse 16, Paul asks us to associate with the lowly and to give up claiming to be wiser than we are. What could that ask of a congregation that thinks well of itself?
6. "Bless those who persecute you" (v. 14). This is the instruction many of us might prefer to skip. What do you think it means to bless someone who has done harm?
7. Paul writes about revenge and then quotes scripture: "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, says the Lord" (v. 19). What do you think Paul is suggesting? Have you ever wrestled with this verse?
8. The passage closes, "overcome evil with good" (v. 21). Where do you see people doing this? What do you think it takes to overcome evil with good?

Additional (Optional) Questions

1. If a visitor asked you what "connexion" means, how would you answer?
2. Does connexion go out from the church? Come in from outside the church? Are one of these more important than the other?
3. When we worship on Sunday, we join together in scripture, we join Jesus at table with his disciples, and we remember the generations who worshipped before us. When have you felt this connexion? Was there a hymn, a prayer, or a particular circumstance involved?

4. Jesus shared his last meal privately with a few of those closest to him, and said his body and blood were given for many. What does this kind of generosity mean? What could that say about how far the work of one congregation might go?
5. Who in this congregation has watched over you in love? What could it look like for you to do that for someone this fall?

Weekly Action

Choose one person in this congregation who has looked after you: someone who noticed you were missing, who prayed for you, who brought a casserole, who drove you to an appointment. Write down what they did. Then tell them, by note, by phone, or in person.

Then choose one item from Paul's list and do it once. Welcome a stranger. Contribute to a need. Rejoice with someone whose news is good. Weep with someone who has had bad news. Then notice which one was harder, the thanking or the doing.

Prayer

God of grace, you love us first, and you join us to one another. Thank you for this congregation, for the people beside us at the table, and for United Methodists worshipping this morning around the world. Teach us to love genuinely, to welcome strangers, and to rejoice and weep alongside the people you have placed in our midst. Give us the honesty to receive care as freely as we offer it. Where evil does harm, make us people who respond to it with good. Through Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, we pray. Amen.