



**“Rejoice with Those Who Rejoice, Weep with Those Who Weep”**

**Scripture – Romans 12:9-18**

**Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones**

**Sunday, January 15, 2017**

The trial of Dylan Roof has been in the spotlight the past few weeks. Why has it caught the public’s fascination? Perhaps it is the fear that we are sliding back rather than moving forward in solving our nation’s problem of racism; or the dismay over the rise of white nationalist groups; or the anxiety regarding young men being radicalized over the internet by hate-filled speech; or the disturbing thought that a young white man could sit through a Bible study and then murder the people who welcomed him. What went so terribly wrong?

If you have children or grandchildren, you worry about the dark influences that might cause one of them to break in the wrong direction.

Why do you interact with others the way you do? How much of your behavior is based on the way your parents raised you? How much is based on defiance to the way your parents raised you?

Through various forms of media, we are bombarded with messages regarding what constitutes appropriate behavior, the kind of person we should aspire to become, and how we should treat others.

As followers of Jesus, living in North America in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, to what extent should we conform to our surrounding culture and to what extent does God expect us to live counter-culturally? Christians have grappled with this dilemma since the birth of the church nearly 2,000 years ago.

We remember that the initial followers of Jesus were all Jewish, and they had to learn where their lives conformed to traditional Judaism and where they were to break from their tradition. They were to continue to follow the Ten Commandments: have no other gods, do not murder, steal, commit adultery, or covet. They were to care for the poor and welcome the stranger.

However, on some occasions, Jesus spelled out new standards. He redefined the meaning of neighbor when he told the parable of the Good Samaritan. According to Jesus, a neighbor is anyone in need. Jesus countered the idea of “an eye for an eye” with forgiveness and praying for enemies. Rather than fighting opponents, he said, “Blessed are the peacemakers.” He warned of the seductive power of wealth and stressed the importance of extending mercy to those society treats as outcasts. He called on his followers not only to treat others the way they want to be treated, but to actually love others as we love ourselves.

Within a couple of decades of the death and resurrection of Jesus, Gentiles began to become Christians and they faced much more distinct choices than the first Jewish Christians. In what ways could they conform to their Greek culture and in what ways would they need to counter it?

Today's passage comes from Paul's letter to the church in Rome, one of the first Christian communities comprised of both Jews and Gentiles. The main thrust of his letter is to state that God's grace is extended to both groups. His crescendo falls at the end of chapter 11 when he writes, "For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all." (Romans 11:32)

Then, in chapter 12, Paul turns from his cerebral, and sometimes tortuous, theological argument, to the implications of God's grace. That is, how followers of Jesus are expected to live. He begins by saying we are not to be conformed to cultural norms, but rather to strive for the higher standards revealed in the teachings and the actions of Jesus.

Of course, the first item he mentions is love because that is the core of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. He says, "Let love be genuine."

If you want to remain in the shallow end of the pool your entire life, then keep the focus on yourself. However, if you dare to dive into the deeper water, extend yourself in love to another. Risk being vulnerable, risk bearing your soul to another; this is the path to a deeper connection with God and the rich life God yearns for you to live.

Keenly attuned to the life and teachings of Jesus, Paul says that love must be the bedrock on which we construct our lives. But, lest we think Paul will dissolve into a soft-headed, utopian vision where everyone is sweet, he immediately resorts to fiery language. He says, "Hate what is evil."

Hate is such an incendiary word that my parents pounced on me if I uttered it. But Paul seeks to arouse our emotions when it comes to good and evil. We are to hate what is evil – cruelty, injustice, terrorism, greed, deception... Paul reminds us that God not only urges us to do what is right and good, but to oppose what damages and destroys.

So that we not succumb to these dark powers ourselves, Paul immediately counsels us to "cling to what is good." Then, he lists what is good. Love one another with mutual affection and outdo one another in showing respect. Rather than striving to best others, Paul encourages us to lift up others. He says to be patient in suffering and to never lose hope; to be generous to people in need and to extend hospitality to strangers.

He provides wise counsel and encouragement, and one of his lines captures so beautifully love in action. He says, "Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep."

To "Rejoice with those who rejoice," is to celebrate the success and good fortune of others. While he does not mention jealousy or envy, Paul is providing a prescription for overcoming these toxic emotions. I know that no one here has ever reacted this way, but some people become resentful when someone else gets a promotion, or when someone else receives special recognition.

If we exude genuine love – a synonym for Christ-like love – we will not be jealous when good comes to another. We will not calculate the reasons why we are more deserving than the other person. We will not pout that nothing good ever happens to us. Instead, we will applaud the good fortune of another and toast his/her happiness.

The next time you know someone who has had a baby, send a card or a gift to help them revel in their special moment. When a friend has recovered from an illness, call her and expand her joy. When you know a couple is having a special anniversary, enhance their celebration. Jesus enjoyed celebrating a fine meal with friends to such

an extent that his critics called him a glutton and a drunkard. That should remind us that there is nothing spiritual in being a dour spoilsport, but there is heaven sent holiness in celebrating joy.

What sort of transformation would it set off in you, if you could genuinely rejoice with those who rejoice?

Paul also calls on us “to weep with those who weep.” Sooner or later we learn that disappointment, defeat, and suffering are part of life. We do not always get what we deserve. Sometimes we give our very best effort and still we fail. Sometimes life hurls a cruel blow our way. Sometimes friends betray us and loved ones die. When we are in pain, we want someone who will listen sympathetically to our sorrow. We want a friend who will not run from our ranting, nor be uncomfortable with our weakness. We want someone who is not afraid of our intense sadness and tears.

Genuine love is compassionate, and compassion dares to risk feeling the pain of another. Author Sue Monk Kidd says, “When compassion wakes up in us, we find ourselves more willing to become vulnerable...we open our lives (to the suffering of another)...We feel their heart bleeding into ours; we catch their tears. We relieve their pain as much as we are able, and by relieving theirs, we relieve God’s.”

Paula was in her thirties when her doctor discovered she had cancer. She underwent daily doses of radiation for a month, then a brutal regimen of chemotherapy that landed her in bed every third week. Her oncologist never used the word “cure,” but rather spoke in terms of extending life. Paula maintained an amazingly positive attitude with others, but she confided there were times when she was alone that she had some very frank talks with God.

It was never clear how much the treatments helped, but she was confident about one thing that kept her going – her three friends. In addition to driving Paula’s children to their after school activities and dropping off meals, each Wednesday they gathered at Paula’s house. Late morning, when Paula was at her best and their children were in school, the four of them got together for coffee and Paula would drink her ginger ale in a champagne glass.

They would reminisce about the fun times they had enjoyed together – filling the room with laughter as they remembered children’s birthday parties, shopping trips, and various embarrassing experiences.

There were also solemn moments when Paula shared her anxieties and fears. The house would go still as she opened up. The box of tissues would be passed around.

The beauty of those moments was impossible to describe. The love that flowed among them was so intense and nourishing and transformative.

When Paula’s body gave out, it hit her friends very hard. It rocked their lives. They said they would not wish such grief on anyone. They also said they would not trade that experience for anything, because their times together of both rejoicing and weeping were among the holiest moments they had ever known.

“Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.” What would happen if you taped that one verse to your mirror, and every day you set out to meet the world with those words ringing in your ears? Rejoice with those who have even the smallest reason to rejoice and hitch your heart to anyone who is grieving. It will nourish your soul and bring you closer to God.