



“Avoiding Being a Disappointment”

Text: Romans 14:1-12

a sermon by Kevin Fleming

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

Wendy and I drove up to Bloomington yesterday to watch a rugby match – can you believe it? – a rugby between IU and Purdue. The son of dear friends is playing rugby for the Hoosiers and since the Florida International football game, for which we had tickets, was cancelled, we went to see rugby. It could become one of my new favorite sports.

But on the way, heading north on I-69, there were some signs of the coming autumn. The sumac along the road is already a bright red – maybe I should say crimson – or at least scarlet. A few of the maple trees, undoubtedly the valedictorians of their class, are already a beautiful orange and are setting the pace for the rest of the maples.

Some of the farmers who rolled the dice on planting a little earlier than usual, have already begun the harvesting. The combines are in the fields, gathering in the corn and soy beans, and giving the fields their autumnal flat-top, just leaving a burr where just a moment before was a great head full of stalks and bushes. It looks like the fields have joined the military and gone off to boot camp and got that serious haircut.

We had some baroque music on the radio as we drove along. Robert Aubrey Davis, a perfect name for someone with a baroque radio show, was demonstrating the power of the keys of F minor and B minor, keys that are rich and melancholy and have that touch of despondency that is sometimes typical of autumn. Mr. Davis played music of Archangelo Corelli, the father of the sonata and concerto and the musical godfather of Handel and Bach, whose music he also played.

It was in driving in the beautiful morning, with the first blush of autumn painted on the trees, and the harvest being “safely gathered in, e'er the winter storms begin,” that my mind wandered off to Thanksgiving. By now you know that Thanksgiving is my favorite holiday of the year. That may surprise you, considering my vocation and avocation. You might think I would put my chips on Christmas, or maybe even Easter. But, no. Thanksgiving is my favorite. I loved the songs, the aromas, the getting the feast together, the gathering of dear ones. I love Thanksgiving.

And when I think of Thanksgiving, I think of my father-in-law. He loved Thanksgiving and the incredible tradition on Wendy's side of the family, of gathering together with our friends, the Thompsons, a tradition that has continued unbroken for 55 years, though from time to time members of the family take a hiatus for a year. My father-in-law would sit at the head of the table and look around at each of the children and grandchildren and take a look at the outlaws, and render his verdict. With anticipation, he would simply say, “Look at all of you. And not one screw up.”

There it was. That was high praise. It was as close to a benediction as Bill McCormick ever came to offering. He said it with a twinkle in his eye, of course, but on a whole other level, he meant it with genuine sincerity. In spite of the odds, and the odds were stacked against some of us, we had somehow managed to avoid being a disappointment. If you delved into his comment and its source, you might translate it, “I'm proud of all of you.” And what more could a child, or grandchild, or even an in-law, ever hope to hear?

These past three weeks we have been reading selections from Paul's Letter to the Romans. The Letter to the Romans is a heavy-duty treatise of Christian theology. Paul lays out his whole idea that we are justified by faith, not by birth, or works, or any of the other things we sometimes think are in play. It is by our believing that we are put right with God.

And God's love never lets us go. You get to the 8th chapter of Romans and you find those words that are without peer:

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

No...For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And there's so much more.

But in chapters 12-15, Paul gets quite practical in his teaching. For the past two weeks, Paul has reminded us of what it means to be a Christian. He reminds us of the power of love – genuine, self-sacrificing love – love that is for God and for neighbor – and how, as we live that love, the world around us is changed. He’s been telling about how the world will be transformed, not by might or manipulation, but by compassion and caring.

And today, he’s telling us, one last time, how we should live this new life in Christ. “Welcome the weak,” he says. Who are they? Who are the weak? And who are the strong? In the Kingdom of God, things are usually turned upside down. Might the weak be those who wrap themselves in power, while the strong are those who rely on God’s love and the love of their neighbors? In the upside down Kingdom of God, what does it mean to be weak? And what does it mean to be strong?

And what of the truly weak? What is Paul suggesting to us about the immigrant, the homeless, those with profound mental illness, those who were born among us to parents from beyond our borders? Who are the weak and how are we welcoming them?

In the Roman church there were conflict between those who had converted from Judaism to Christianity and those who were Gentile Christians. How are we to live in a religiously diverse world? How are we to relate to Jews and Muslims, which we’re pretty good at doing, considering we all have Abraham in common? But how are we to relate to Hindus and Buddhists and Taoists and agnostics and humanists and all those who do not see things as we see them? What does it mean to be a Christian in a world with a great gathering of religious and non-religious traditions?

How do we move from our acceptance of that great invitation from God to a new way of life, to living that new life from day-to-day? Our experience of God gives our lives purpose and meaning. Our experience of God gives life joy and happiness. How do we live that out with people who are like us and with people who are different from us?

One thing is certain: Paul tells us plainly that however we live together – with those who believe as we believe and with those who believe unlike the ways we believe – there can be no judgment. Paul could not be more plainly spoken:

“Why do you pass judgment of your brother or your sister?

Or why do you despise your brother or sister?

Paul’s lesson is that if there is to be any judgment, it is not our job, but God’s alone. There is no room for judgments being deliberated and passed among the people of God. There is no cause for one to judge another. In the new life of the Christian, grace has entered in and love for God and neighbor is the watchword.

Each of us must find this new way of living. Each of us must make this new life our own. We may do it a little differently from another. We may find new twists on old themes. We may discover things we have been doing all along that are part of the new life. We may discover some new expressions of the new life that will require new energy and new effort.

But the point Paul is making is that we have to get on with it. We have to live this new life. We have to live this new life without asserting power, without throwing our weight around, without judgment, without superiority, and without condemnation. We must find ways to live this new life celebrating commonality, supporting those in need, standing for those who are oppressed, caring for those who are forgotten, and being the people God intended us to be from the beginning.

And when I hear Paul challenging us with that new life, I can see him sitting at the head of a table, and looking around the table at all those who have been called to God's Table. And in my imagination, I can hear him say, "Please avoid being a disappointment – to God, to Christ, to each other, and to the world. You are far too important to screw up. Please avoid being a disappointment."

For now and evermore. Amen.



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