

Loving Sincerely

Romans 12: 9-21

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Sometimes as a pastor you come upon something humorous and sweet at the same time and it sticks with you. Every time you remember it is just as the funny as the first time. Every time you remember it is just as sweet as the first time. Our church in Houston gave the responsibility for opening the church on Sunday morning to the elders. The elders would show up early and make coffee and open doors and turn on the heat. It was pretty exhaustive work. The elder who had the responsibility that particular Sunday was called the Duty Elder. So one Sunday the responsibility of being Duty Elder fell on a woman named Ruth. I was at church early getting ready for worship when I saw Ruth walking the halls of church, fulfilling her responsibility as Duty Elder. But I noticed Ruth was not alone. Her husband Ku was with her. I greeted Ruth and said, "I see you are Duty Elder today." With the sweetest grin you have ever seen Ruth said, "Not quite." She pointed at Ku, her husband, who actually was doing all the work. She said, "He is Duty...I am Elder." And they moved along with Ku doing the work and Ruth doing the pointing and directing. From that moment on Duty Elder took on new meaning at our church. It was funny, and it was sweet to see these two working side by side.

We were shocked and saddened when Ku died suddenly not long after being the Duty part of Duty Elder. I will never forget the powerful testimonies and tributes that were shared at his memorial service. Ruth and Ku were part of a significant number of people who left their homeland of Formosa, now known as Taiwan, to make a home in the United States. Ruth and Ku were some of early ones to make that move, and they settled initially on the east coast. The home of Ruth and Ku became the first stop in this new country for numerous friends and family who also made the move from Taiwan. The new country, the new culture, the new customs, all were strange and unfamiliar, made having a place of entry, a place of welcome, even a place of refuge vitally important. Ruth and Ku provided that for others. They opened their home and they opened their hearts. Apparently one of the ways the Formosan culture displays respect, admiration, and affection is by sending flowers at a time of loss. The day we gathered for Ku's memorial service the church was filled to overflowing with bouquets and sprays of the most beautiful flowers.

I am thinking of Ku and Ruth because today is All Saints Day, a day when we pause to remember the great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us. We often refer to that great cloud of witnesses as the communion of saints, and that fits perfectly with today, for the table is already set for us to celebrate communion. On this All Saints Day, on this communion Sunday, our passage of scripture from Romans 12 has reminded us that we are the Body of Christ, many members with different functions but each and every one vitally important. Between the time I finish my sermon and the time we come to the Lord's Table there will be a special anthem called, "How Beautiful." As you listen you will hear a phrase over and over, "How beautiful is the Body of Christ."

I mentioned Ruth and Ku Yeh because on this All Saints Day with the table set before us and the scripture reminding us of the Body of Christ, I thought I might just spend a few moments inviting people to this table who have lived out some of the things Paul mentions in Romans 12. Paul said, "Practice hospitality." Ruth and Ku opened their home to many people who had crossed the ocean and left their home and all that was familiar. When immigrants from Taiwan landed here in the United States they found two people, Ruth and Ku, who opened their home and opened their heart, practicing the gift of hospitality. On this All Saints Day, do you know someone who has practiced hospitality, who has opened their heart, their home, their life, to welcome and help others find a place of belonging, a place to call home? If someone comes to mind, invite them. Invite them to come and sit at this table.

That might be what Paul is doing at the end of this letter to the Romans. He has been theological and he has been thoughtful. He has been pointed and he has been deep. He has been challenging and he has been affirming. And then come chapter 16, as the letter draws to a close, he starts to name some folks who have put all of this faith into practice. "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church...she has been a great help to many people, including me." Phoebe, come sit down at this table. Phoebe was apparently a deacon. Don't we know some deacons who have spent their days serving the Lord and helping others? Tell those deacons, those ones with a serving heart to come and have a seat. It is All Saints Day. Greet Apelles, whose fidelity to Christ has stood the test. Do you some who were like the good soil, not withering in the sun, not getting choked out by weeds, not losing their faith almost before they found it? Do you know some whose fidelity to Christ has stood the test and brought forth a harvest of faith? Scoot over and make room at the table. It is All Saints day. Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, those women who worked very hard for the Lord. Every church has some women like that. They are often in the kitchen preparing meals, setting up receptions for memorial services and funerals, but they also are stitching and knitting and painting and baking and visiting and loving and caring and working with the children and chaperoning the youth and reaching out to the poor and need. Do you

know some women who have worked very hard for the Lord? Tell them to stop for a moment and have a seat. It is All Saints Day.

You know Paul cared for Barnabas, the early believer who gave so much when he sold his land and laid all the proceeds to the disciples. That same Barnabas also stood up for Paul when his conversion was being questioned, when people doubted the sincerity of Paul's faith. Barnabas staked his own reputation on Paul. Has someone stood up for you? Has someone believed in you? Has someone seen past your faults, your inexperience, your immaturity and your failures? Has there been someone who believed more about you than you believed about yourself? I have a friend who is that person for me. On All Saints Day I want my high school youth pastor to make his way up here and squeeze in. He believed in me before I believed I had anything to offer for the kingdom and for our King.

You can work your way through the passage in Romans 12 and work on your invitation list. With each of these exhortations, who played that role for you?

- Love must be sincere
- Be devoted to one another in love
- Honor one another above yourself
- Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord
- Be joyful in hope
- Be patient in affliction
- Be faithful in prayer
- Share with the Lord's people who are in need
- Practice hospitality
- Rejoice with those who rejoice
- Weep with those who weep

With each exhortation, let us name the people, the saints, the brothers and sisters in Christ, the members of the Body of Christ. As the table fills up I want to share with you one of the most special memories in the Eberly family. In fifth grade our daughter Hayley was elected to the patrol team at her school. This was back in 1998, a long time ago. The patrol team is that group of kids who set up cones to direct traffic, open doors for cars in parent pick up and drop off, stop cars on the streets, and that type of thing. One month Hayley was chosen as the captain of the patrol team. As I was driving her to school, she told me she had instructed her team about a certain door at school. It could not be unlocked, so she had told her team to prop the door open. I dropped her off after she had told me all this and she ran up and checked on the door. Sure enough, her team had remembered to prop the door open. Before I drove away she stuck her head in the car and told me that her team had remembered. Then she said, "My people are good."

As a pastor I have repeated that phrase so many times. “My people are good.” As the saints are coming forward and taking their place at the table...as you come forward and take your place at the table...as you practice hospitality...as you love sincerely...as you are devoted to one another in love...as you are patient in affliction...as you are faithful in prayer...as you share with those who are in need...as you rejoice with those who rejoice...and as you weep with those who weep...I sit back and take it all in...I watch, I listen, I laugh, I cry, I rejoice, I give thanks...and I say, “My people are good.”

So today on All Saints Day, as the Body of Christ has gathered at the table to celebrate communion, let us hear again the powerful message from the preacher in Hebrews. “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that so easily entangles. Let us run with perseverance the race marked before us.” There is a great cloud of witnesses, they are gathered at the table, and their encouragement to us, their challenge to us, their call to us, is to run the race with perseverance.

But there’s more, isn’t there. The image about the Body of Christ in Romans 12 begins with the words, “In view of God’s mercy...” We don’t set things in motion, Jesus Christ does. He gave his life, and it is his life that gives us life. In view of God’s mercy, dear saints, let us run the race. And that is actually what the preacher in Hebrews says. Let us run the race, yes. But how do we do it. Not just by looking at the saints gathered at the table, as helpful and as hopeful as that is. No, the preacher says, “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” Alright then. Let us give thanks for the great cloud of witnesses. But let us never stop there. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and the perfecter of our faith, who endured the cross for us and for our salvation. As we live for him, as we love sincerely and love with devotion and practice hospitality and all those other things we do as the Body of Christ, let us live faithfully. And may it be that as our Lord looks at us, as he sees us running the race for his sake and for his glory, maybe, just maybe he will look at us, his children, his people, his church, and say, “My people are good.”