

For the last several weeks, we've been exploring the middle section of the Gospel of Matthew, and we've looked at Jesus under a microscope and discovered some very human moments in the midst of his divine miracles.

But as summer winds down and we look toward September, I want to pivot a bit and take a look at *our* very human lives. For four out of the next seven weeks, we'll be hearing from the letter that Paul wrote to the church in Rome. It is a young church of Gentiles and Jews who are struggling to make their way without strong leadership from someone who knew Jesus.

Unlike other early churches in modern day Turkey or Syria, no famous Apostle started the church in Rome. It was likely that merchants and travelers learned about Jesus on their trips to the area of Jerusalem and Palestine, both Jews and non-Jews, and then brought the faith back with them and started small house-churches. But they had no scripture text to study, no hymnals to sing from, just a few stories and experiences and a calling to worship a God who came to earth and died for our sakes and called us to live radically – which we'll hear more about in a moment.

Paul, at the time of this writing, about 57 CE, or about 24 years after Jesus died, had never been to Rome. So, this letter he is writing is an introductory letter to them, and he's explaining theology and faith and discipleship to them as one who hopes to send a resource for them to use and has ambition to come and visit them on his way to Spain.

Now, the church in Rome is diverse. It is in the cultural center of one of the most powerful empires in the history of the world. The internet says there were nearly one million people living in Rome at that time. It was truly the New York City of its day. And Paul says this to them in chapter twelve, from the Message translation.

So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what [God] wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.

³ I'm speaking to you out of deep gratitude for all that God has given me, and especially as I have responsibilities in relation to you. Living then, as every one of you does, in pure grace, it's important that you not misinterpret yourselves as people who are bringing this goodness to God. No, God brings it all to you. The only accurate way to understand ourselves is by what God is and by what [God] does for us, not by what we are and what we do for him.

⁴⁻⁶ In this way we are like the various parts of a human body. Each part gets its meaning from the body as a whole, not the other way around. The body we're talking about is Christ's body of chosen people. Each of us finds our meaning and function as a part of his body. But as a chopped-off finger or cut-off toe we wouldn't amount to much, would we? So since we find ourselves fashioned into all these excellently formed and marvelously functioning parts in Christ's body, let's just go ahead and be what we were made to be, without enviously or pridefully comparing ourselves with each other, or trying to be something we aren't.

⁶⁻⁸ If you preach, just preach God's Message, nothing else; if you help, just help, don't take over; if you teach, stick to your teaching; if you give encouraging guidance, be careful that you don't get bossy; if you're put in charge, don't manipulate; if you're called to give aid to people in distress, keep your eyes open and be quick to respond; if you work with the disadvantaged, don't let yourself get irritated with them or depressed by them. Keep a smile on your face.

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

This is good news indeed, and good advice. And it reminds me of the balance we find ourselves in on this earth. We are Christians, and we are Americans. We are Christians, and we are part of a global economy. We are Christians and we are New Englanders.

Paul is writing to people who are Christian, and citizens of Rome. And what he says is that we are called to be counter cultural - to be weird. To live with one foot in this world and one in God's world and to not blend in with the rest of society, but that's harder than it sounds.

For example, we've been back to school shopping. New shoes, new clothes, haircuts, backpacks, water bottles, lunch boxes. There's a mixture of excitement and dread in the air. And we want our kids to walk in on day one and fit in. So we went looking for the latest styles, and guess what? Flare-legged jeans are back. It's amazing to me how fashion doesn't really evolve as much as it recycles. We've seen mom jeans replace low rise jeans, baggy pants replace skinny pants, and the return of animal prints. It's all about keeping up with the latest fashion trends.

So, my rising 5th grader got herself some flare-legged jeans. She's going to fit in. And I'm all for it. All my kids can have a say in their own style. And if they want to look like the other kids in their class and talk about their collection of squishy things, then I'm happy to support them.

Sometimes, we do make choices to stand *out*, but most of the time, consciously or unconsciously, we make choices to fit in. It's true of our clothes, our hobbies – I mean, pickleball took off awfully quickly and many of you leapt on that bandwagon.

And while the 1980s were a strong decade, I don't see any ladies here wearing 80s hair or embracing the shoulder pads up to our ears look – but we all did it back then. Gosh that was a lot of hairspray.

Whatever the style, we adjust to keep up and fit in. We look, and act like, and have the same products as the people around us.

We assume that if you live here you're a Red Sox and Patriots fan. We assume you love soupy. We assume you know not to turn left onto Post Road in the summertime. Because we all learn and conform to our environment.

But as Christians, we are called to be weird. We're called to be noticeably different, to stand out, not just by worshipping Jesus for an hour a week but with your whole life, every day. As Paul said, we are to fight the urge to "become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking."

The Rev. Dr. Israel (Ka-mu-dzan-du) Kamudzandu says, "writing to those under the Roman Empire, Paul persuades Christian communities living in the imperial center to live not according to the political ideologies of Rome, but rather to live out faith on the basis of what God did in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ."

In other words, we're called to be weird . . . like Jesus.

Jesus was weird in the best ways. He was a Jewish man who kept commandments and broke commandments. He befriended the outcasts and ate with sinners and honored women and confronted the people in power. He was silent when on trial and took up his cross when he could have called down an army of angels. Jesus was weird. We've talked in previous weeks about how Jesus was not the Messiah that anyone was expecting. They assumed the Messiah would be born into the ruling class. That he'd use physical strength and violence to drive the Romans out of their land. That he'd restore the political kingdom that harkened back to King David. Jesus wasn't any of those things. He was weird. Radically weird.

James Talarico recently said that Jesus was far more radical than we can comprehend, and he pointed out that the word radical comes from the Latin word *radix*, which means root. A radical person like Jesus is going to the root of problems – which often have to do with the distribution of wealth, judging one another, and an absence of humility and grace.

And Jesus turned all those societal norms on their heads. And instead of ruling through power, he demonstrated the mighty power of love.

God's love is ridiculous. Author Brennan Manning said, *"One of the mysteries of the gospel tradition is this strange attraction of Jesus for the unattractive, this strange desire for the undesirable, this strange love for the unlovely. I could more easily contain Niagara Falls in a tea cup than I can comprehend the wild, uncontainable love of God."*

We have to admit it. Jesus was strange. He lived among us, but he lived abnormally.

And he calls us to community that magnifies the abnormality. The Christian community isn't supposed to look like the society we live in. In Christian community, we all bring our gifts, not to impress but to bless. We give our resources away. We volunteer for something bigger than our own household. We are called to be humble and vulnerable and lean on each other, and that particularly in modern America with our independent isolationism . . . is weird.

In other words, holy weirdness, Jesus' weirdness, Christian weirdness, looks like love.

Not sentimental love. Not polite love. But the kind of love that refuses to treat people as disposable. The kind of love that listens before it speaks. The kind of love that forgives over and over again. The kind of love that welcomes the stranger, honors the ones in need, and refuses to repay evil for evil. The kind of love that allows each of us to come exactly as we are – not the polished and socially conforming version of ourselves, but the authentic, genuine, messy, and imperfect self.

This is not how the world works. And that's exactly the point.

When Christians live this way—when we refuse to conform to the world's mold—we become a living signpost pointing to a different kingdom, not the kingdom of Rome or the kingdom of America, but the kingdom of Heaven. And people notice. Not because we're loud, but because we're different.

When we choose compassion over competition, people notice. When we choose generosity over hoarding, people notice. When we choose truth over convenience, people notice. When we choose forgiveness over revenge, people notice. When we choose hope over cynicism, people notice.

Our weirdness becomes our witness.

But let's be honest: being weird takes courage. It's easier to blend in. It's easier to follow the script. It's easier to chase the same goals everyone else is chasing. It's easier to show up and say that everything's fine.

But normal isn't what we're called to be. We are called to be transformed. We are called to be living sacrifices who make choices each and every day to be different than the people of this world. We are called to be signs of God's mercy in a world that has forgotten mercy.

And here's the good news: we don't do this alone.

After Paul tells us that we are to let God change us from the inside out so much that we can present our everyday lives as an offering, Paul describes a whole community of people learning to live differently *together*. We are interconnected as the body of Christ on earth. Not individuals being weird individually but a diverse group of people with different gifts, practicing those gifts with kindness and compassion, and supporting one another in our weirdness.

A community where each person's weirdness becomes part of the beauty of the whole. A community where your gift strengthens mine, and mine strengthens yours. A community where we help each other resist the world's pressures and lean into God's transformation.

The church is meant to be a gathering of holy oddballs, worshipping weirdos, different disciples, surprising saints, — people who don't quite fit the world's expectations because the kingdom we're hoping and praying for is so unlike what we're surrounded by. Yes, we have one foot in this world. We have to spend currency that the

world accepts in order to eat and drink and survive, but we've also got one foot in a world that lives in an utterly different way – a way of communal sharing and loving our neighbors so that no one is lacking basic needs. No one. A way that responds to hate with love. A way that responds to scarcity with generosity. A way that responds to judgment with mercy.

Paul says to the church, we're dependent on one another – I need you and you need me like you need your own lungs and heart and big toe to help you balance. In a world defined by wealth and power and individualism, try the Jesus way. It's counter cultural. It's weird, but it's life-giving. Amen.