

Romans 12:1-2; 9-13

Ralph Waldo Emerson once asked the question, “What is the hardest task in the world?” To which he immediately responded, “The hardest task in the world is...to think.” In many ways, I would agree with Emerson. It is extremely hard to think outside of our comfort zones of what we’ve been taught all our lives or what is popular in culture. It is challenging to think for ourselves and to form our own opinions in life, especially when it comes to our faith. Here Paul is appealing to the 1st century believers in Rome- by the mercies of God- **to offer their bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God** (v. 1). This- Paul says- is your true and appropriate worship. He goes on to advise not to let the present age “squeeze us into its mold, nor dictate to us how we should think nor tell us how we can and can’t behave. We are to be transformed; our minds need to be renewed” (Tom Wright, *Romans*). Because of what God’s mercy has done for us, we worship- mind and body- as a self-giving response. In turn, the Spirit pours out gifts into the body of Christ, which Paul mentions in the verses in between the verses we read today.

We just sang the words, “We have come into this house and gathered in God’s name to worship him.” Life shaped in the way Paul describes it is spiritual worship- it’s a grateful response to the God who has delivered us from our slavery to sin. This worship “requires choosing to be transformed in mind by God’s Spirit rather than conformity to what everyone else does or thinks” (*The Discipleship Study Bible*, p. 1939). When our minds are renewed, it makes possible the discerning and doing of God’s intentions for human life.

This little word “discern,” which means to “distinguish between things” makes me think of how much we need community to sift through today’s confusing and mixed messages and travel toward the truth. We can’t always discern on our own. As Christians we’re called to live counter culturally- “ready to challenge those parts of the present age that shout or whisper seductively, that it would be easier and better to do things that way- while the age to come, already begun in Jesus, insists that belonging to the new creation means that we must live this way instead” (Wright). For Paul there is always a relationship between grace and concrete action. Because of God’s mercy, we offer ourselves in worship, which means in genuine love.

After reading and studying this scripture, I’d have to say that “to love” may be right up there with “to think” as one of the hardest tasks in the world, if not “the” hardest task. Instead of being governed by the next biggest high out there: power, greed, pride, or success, genuine love urges us toward all that is good and in the best interest of our neighbors. **The “love” Paul speaks about in Romans is not fake, and it’s more about what people do than about how they feel.** I saw a t-shirt the other day that sums this up. It read, “Love is an Action Word.” Authentic love is a concrete practice, not abstract words. As followers of Christ, we are called to love- to do something. Many of us know that intellectually- we’ve heard it preached many a time- the same old sermon- but we can’t quite make the connection nor bring ourselves to act on anything. Maybe it’s because we are afraid? Maybe it’s because we don’t want to work too hard? Or maybe it’s because love hurts too much? Whatever the reason...we don’t always get our calling to love. Love is a very simple, four letter word (one of those first words that we

learned to spell). And yet, love is one of **the hardest** words to say aloud and even harder to put into practice daily as we seek to follow Jesus. When we sit down to actually think about it, many of us become overwhelmed by this tall order Paul offers in Romans. We make excuses such as, "Maybe God isn't really calling us to do anything right now because we are too young (what I call "the Jeremiah complex"). Or we say, "Maybe we don't really have "those" particular gifts needed for the task- whatever gifts are needed to serve and give glory to God- (what I call "the Moses complex") and the list of excuses go on and on. What gets me is how we just sit- ruminating in our excuses instead of just taking the risk to love- to do something- trusting that God is going to show up...that God is there in the midst. Many of us say, "I've heard that we are to love in the Bible before" and we quickly move on to the next thing. We can talk the talk but we aren't always willing to walk the walk. We say "somebody else will do it" or we claim to be bored and need to hear a new word instead of the same ole, same ole (yada, yada), but our ears aren't really open to listen to God's Spirit, are they? And these words...however familiar...in today's scripture...aren't words to be easily dismissed. No. They're words that demand not only our attention but our action.

Last Saturday Triune's Board of Directors gathered for a half-day retreat in the basement of United Ministries. We met for an hour to do our regular business but then we stayed for another three or so hours to be led in a diversity, equity, and inclusivity training and conversation, facilitated by Jessica Sharp. One of the first things Jessica said was that love is the

opposite of fear. We named some hard, unintentional truths and dreams that day. One thing named is that we're a mainly white board with a mainly white staff, and we want to work, with God's help, at getting more voices at the table and listening to one another. The composition of the board- who is on the board- needs to adequately reflect our parishioners. One of the comments made was the frustration of having had this conversation for years but nothing happening for various reasons. Before we ended the meeting, one board member spoke up that they had been moved by the Holy Spirit and asked to resign their seat at the table at the end of the year so that a person who is missing from the table on Triune's board, particularly a person of color, may have their seat. Now this person loved serving on the board, and they felt that the most loving and hospitable thing to do was to resign. This board member said while they respected that fear can be the opposite of love, they felt that selfishness is the opposite of love. In other words, to love genuinely from the center of who you are is to be selfless. Next thing you know another board member, who had served for a good many years off and on, offered up their seat and then another one followed. A few had tears in their eyes while others had goosebumps while perhaps a few were uncomfortable with change. Genuine love permeated the room. It was holy. It was spiritual worship.

Listen again to Paul's no-nonsense vision of Christian living- both in and outside of the church. Listen to what can happen when we don't conform to this world but are transformed by the renewing of our minds, discerning the will of God. Love is genuine when...we turn away from evil, holding on

to what is good. Love is genuine when...we love one another with mutual affection. Love is genuine when...we outdo one another in showing honor. Love is genuine when...we do not lag in zeal and serve the Lord. Love is genuine when...we rejoice in hope, are patient in suffering and persevere in prayer. Love is genuine when we contribute to the needs of our sisters and brothers and extend hospitality to strangers (vv. 2, 9-13). One scholar specifically comments on the reflection of God's love through hospitality. They said "we must move beyond hospitality as charity to hospitality as an act of justice. Hospitality as charity offers crumbs from our tables; hospitality as justice offers a place at the table. In our world, hospitality involves transformation of the system that is inhospitable to so many" (Eleazar S. Fernandez, *FOW*).

In a few minutes, David will sing a song during the offering by Matthew West that West wrote entitled, "Do Something." This song was inspired by a girl named Andrea and by her willingness to let love be genuine. West explains: "I will never forget meeting Andrea. If I were judging a book by its cover, I'd say she looked like a college girl, maybe in a sorority or something, lots of friends, bound to be successful someday. And in a way, that would be a correct assessment. But that is not the whole story. Andrea, a former University of Colorado student had chosen to spend a semester abroad learning micro-financing in Uganda. While there, she happened upon an orphanage in critical condition. The children were being badly neglected and even abused. Her heart broke for these orphans who had no advocate. That's when this college student decided to do

something. She called her parents and said, 'I'm not coming home.' She refused to leave these children until something was done to improve the conditions. By sheer determination and refusal to give up, Andrea and her sister convinced the Ugandan government to close down that orphanage, which left about forty children with no place to go. The government handed the children to her," West continued. "Andrea brought this need back to the States with a new vision and desire to create a safe place for these children to grow and learn. Today, Musana (which means 'sunshine') is a thriving orphanage in Iganga, Uganda, housing over one hundred children! Andrea prefers spending most of her time in Uganda, not the US. She's a long way from a sorority house or a college campus. She's reaching the world, and bringing hope to people, one helpless child at a time. When asked what it was that made her fight for these children she simply said, "I just kept thinking, 'if I don't do something, who will?'" Andrea's story stood out to West. He said "today, so many of us Christians talk so much about being the hands and feet of Christ, but never really display what that looks like. Andrea has gone to the extremes to show us all what wild abandon to the cause of Christ looks like. It's not about talking. It's about doing!!! It's time for us to do something (<https://www.songfacts.com/facts/matthew-west/do-something>)!"

In his lyrics, West laments about seeing unjust things happening. As Andrea observed, if we don't do something about the injustices we see...then who will?! West says that some of us may say, "It's alright. Somebody else will do something." He looks up to heaven and shakes his fist at God shouting

for God to do something. God eventually answers him saying that God did do something- God created us. Yes, God works through us, yet God has given us agency- free will- to act in genuine love- to do something- to help others experience God's goodness. No, this passage is not a greeting card slogan nor a Nike campaign; it's a call to costly discipleship (Rochelle A. Stackhouse, FOW). Friends, believe it or not, worship isn't just on Sundays. Worship happens every time we act in genuine love- not fear or selfishness- worship happens every time we do something after much prayer and listening for God's Spirit. So let us go out and worship God. After all...isn't it time for us to do something?! Amen.