

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 17
Year A

Jeremiah 15:15-21
Psalm 26:1-8
Romans 12:9-21
Matthew 16:21-28

If the church is a community set apart from the world for the work of the Kingdom of God, what makes it distinctive from every other organization? How can anyone tell the difference between the church and the world? Perhaps Paul gives us some markers of that difference in these verses from his letter to the Church in Rome.

These verses read almost like a covenant or contract, describing how we are to act as Christians. Be genuine in our love for one another, hate what is evil, cling to what is good, love each other as members of our family, and the list goes on. I think we can all agree that these are necessary attributes for a Christian.

The next paragraph gets a little tougher. Here, we see how we are to act with those who don't act like us. There is some discussion in the commentaries about whether Paul is talking about some members of the community who are in dispute with others in the community or if he is telling us how to react to those outside the community who might be persecuting us. During the period when this letter was written, there was no known persecution of the church happening, especially in Rome. The closest might be the expulsion of the Jews from the Imperial City. Either way, Paul is setting a high bar for us as we interact with those around us.

While every community is influenced by the cultural surrounding it, we need to be aware, as the early Christian were, of how we are to stand apart from others. As was mentioned in the class last Sunday, we are to be known by our love – not just for each other, but for everyone. This is where Paul calls us out to really show our uniqueness in the world. It is easy to love those who love you, but to love the one who is actively harming you is distinctive. To hang out with those who are down and out, trying to help them up, is not the cultural norm.

When Paul gets down to the part about feeding the enemy and giving them something to drink when they are thirsty, it almost sounds like being a traitor to our cause. Can anyone imagine stopping in the middle of a battle to offer food and drink to those who are fighting against us? But that is exactly what Paul is saying. We are to put humanitarian action ahead of all else. We are to leave it to God to straighten everything out.

Now, that is the big picture of what Paul is asking of us. But, what are we to do in our daily lives to be set apart from those around us? How are we to live so that, as a community of believers, people will know we are Christians? The gospel reading might give us the answer.

Where Paul asks us to live with daily self-sacrificing as we deal with others, Jesus goes a little further and tells us to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Him. At this point in the

gospel story, Jesus is no longer focused on the crowds, but has turned to teaching the disciples what they are going to face in Jerusalem. Peter has just made his famous confession that Jesus is the Messiah, and now Jesus is chastising him for being focused on human things. This is not the last time the church has had problems following Jesus. History is full of instances where the church has fallen short. Perhaps the church is in one of those places now.

How, then, are we to follow Jesus? Paul says we are to set ourselves apart by our behavior. Jesus tells us to follow Him, not into palaces or places where all is well, but to go into the places of greatest need. Paul gives us a list of attributes that will make us distinctive, while Jesus is calling us to mix with the outcasts of the world. Both are telling us to feed the hungry – friend and foe alike. Both are telling us to act differently towards others through genuine love for all.

To be a Christian in twenty-first century America means to be different from those around us by loving our neighbors, our friends, and our enemies as we love ourselves and God.