FOURTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*Alternative Lives* Romans 12:9-21

Matthew 16:21-28

How do any of us tolerate it when we are asked to rethink, perhaps even redefine familiar ways, or conventional behaviors? As a church, this is what we are called out to do and to be: we are an alternative to the many ways in which sin still permeates the world. We are an alternative community.

For most of us, this is not an easy experience. For example: take Peter. When it comes to our friend Peter, you either have to love him, or feel sorry and embarrassed for him. He does not seem to be very good with change, at least not at this point in the bible.

In one moment, he so perfectly identifies Jesus as the Messiah. Then, in the very next breath, as he expresses shock and disbelief as Jesus tells him what *kind* of Messiah he is going to be. *“God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you,”* he exclaims, then he is rebuked in the strongest fashion, by Jesus, right in front of all the other disciples.

Even worse, Jesus says that Peter has taken Satan’s side, and that he is therefore more of a hindrance than a help. And it is all because, says Jesus, Peter’s mind is on “human things” rather than on “divine things.”

It is a dangerous and often frustrating business to always think you know the mind of the Lord,…and then say so. What Jesus is saying to Peter, and to us, is that we had better be sure that our minds are set on the right things. And what this particular story of Peter’s relationship with Jesus demonstrates is how even he—a disciple who has given up everything to follow Jesus—tends to default to his basic understanding of the world. To Peter’s credit: he is not alone.

Of all the scandalous things Jesus tried to teach his followers, this notion—that he must suffer and die and eventually be raised again—this must have been the hardest for them to grasp. All they had been taught would have led them to believe that the Messiah was going to be a powerful figure, a king, a priest, or a prophet, designated by God to do heroic service, *not* to suffer and be betrayed. The idea of a Messiah who would suffer and *die* was an alien notion.

The closest the Old Testament comes to this idea is in the Suffering Servant Songs of Isaiah [42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12]. In these oracles, Isaiah portrays the generations of Israelites who endured the exile as if they were an individual person, a servant to all other Israelites, who served by enduring the punishment of exile that a previous generation had incurred through their own guilt. By suffering for sins they had not personally committed, the exiled generations restored the whole of Israel.

It is easy to see, then, why this image of the suffering servant appealed so much to the early Christians as an appropriate image of Christ. His suffering on our behalf was likened to the suffering of the servant generations described in Isaiah. Ultimately his death and resurrection came to be seen as part of that whole image as well. Just as Israel was destroyed as a nation, and later restored through the faithful endurance of a small group, Jesus, through his faithful endurance, restored all of humanity to right relationship with God.

As we heard, Jesus not only disabuses Peter of his idea of the kind of Messiah he was going to be, but he also invited Peter to do the same. Jesus invited Peter, and anyone else listening, to *“take up their cross and follow”* him.

What this passage in Matthew is meant to signal to us is that Jesus has turned a corner. When he announces his suffering and death, Jesus is preparing to demonstrate—to the disciples and the world—God’s plan for human thriving. It will not require a “strong man” in the traditional sense—in the sense that Peter and the others were familiar with.

God’s Messiah was going to show the world the alternative life of a new kind of Messiah. Through Jesus, God was showing the world that those who follow Jesus were not going to reflect the same ways of domination through brute strength of the world. The people who follow Jesus were to be a community that is an *alternative* to the ways of the world.

We are to be a community that is “called out” for mission—a community that is transformed by the power of the love shown to us by Jesus Christ. In Jesus God showed us the power of love in action.

In the passage that was read to us from Paul’s letter to the church in Rome, Paul is helping the church understand what this means—and it is not easy.

To begin with: the community he is writing to is surrounded by a much bigger, and very powerful community. The other night in Bible Study, we talked about what that might feel like, and had any of us ever experienced such a sharp difference between one part of society and another. The truth is, we could have talked about any minority community surrounded by a dominant one.

We could have talked about what it was like to be a black person at any point in time in this country.

We could have talked about what it meant to be Japanese and an American during WWII.

We could have talked about what it meant to be an Asian person anywhere outside of Asia during the pandemic.

Each and every one of these examples describes a hostile relationship between the minority and the rest of the society they found themselves. None of them could change their identity, neither could hide it, nor would assimilation help—at least not to the satisfaction of the more extreme members of the larger society.

The thing about the church—in any age—is that it can. We can make ourselves look exactly like the surrounding community. To achieve peace, or to at least escape persecution, the church Paul was writing to in ancient Rome, could have made themselves less obviously Christian—less different than they apparently were.

In our Bible Study, I floated the notion that the church in Rome was very much like living with the hippies’ movement most of us remember from the 1960s and 70s. Those of you who were born after 1975 missed a rather unsettling time—and that is too bad! Let me see if I can find anyone in here born after 1975!

Creating an alternative community was already happening with the work being done among Civil Rights activists who were questioning old ways of regarding race and justice, and demanding changes to laws, and also to old attitudes and beliefs about race.

What the hippies did was heighten this alternative to the older, established way of life in a way that was bold, earnest, flashy, infuriating, sometimes (truth be told) irresponsible, but also unavoidable. The youth from the dominant community were very much a part of the changes that occurred in that era. Many of them were hippies, and they brought that notion of alternative lives into the very heart of their families, in every segment of society.

This is what Paul is doing for the church in Rome. He is helping them understand that they are *not* like their neighbors, *and they are not supposed to be*. As Christ followers, they are an alternative to their surrounding community. They are a community in covenant with Christ, and therefore, called out for mission.

Later, Paul will urge the Roman church to live quietly in their political environment, obey the leaders so far as it is possible and pay their taxes. Roman rulers were typically suspicious of voluntary groups and associations and tended to intervene anytime an association or religious group was perceived to be a threat to Roman peace. If they do not draw undue attention to themselves, Paul believes that they will be allowed to keep meeting.

Despite this, they are to maintain their identity. Paul’s letter provides concrete ways for the believers to exhibit themselves as the body of Christ, and practically show how the community might avoid strife with one another and live peaceably with all.

As one commentator has written:

*The believers have the marker of the Spirit and can live by it, but they still reside in a realm that is corrupted by sin’s power.*

Well, two thousand years have come and gone and the bad news is that we still live in that realm. The power of sin is still very real and is often aided and abetted by the human tendency to have our minds on “human things” rather than on “divine things.”

Paul’s letter to the Romans was his effort to help them guard against that, and when we are being honest with ourselves, and each other, we know that this is our challenge, too. And although he goes into some very practical detail on how to do this, it is the very first phrase of this passage that sums up the whole of his message—and Jesus’ message, too, for that matter.

Paul began this passage with, *“Let love be genuine.”*

Yes, there is evil in the world, and Paul knows it. *“But God’s people are to meet it in the way that even God met it, with love and generous goodness,”* says theologian N.T. Wright. God knows that *“the way to overthrow evil, rather than perpetuating it, is to take its force and give back goodness instead.”*

That is what Jesus did on the cross, and we are challenged in daily acts of love and sacrifice to do the same. We are called to be an alternative to the world—a refuge from it, but also a missionary to it. An alternative life that welcomes, where love is genuine, is sacrificial, and is blessed.

Finally, may we learn from Peter—despite his impetuousness. Indeed, may we come to resemble the mature Peter whose love was genuine, and whose life was an alternative life dedicated to showing the world a new kind of Messiah. We can this too. My prayer for us is that we will. In all the ways we are practicing that now and in many more ways to come, in the years to come. May this be so. Amen.