

Pay it forward together

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Pentecost + 13a – Romans 12.1-5 – *Our call to pay it forward together*

Pay it forward is the name of a movie where people who've experienced kindness pay the generosity forward – even to complete strangers – rather than paying it back to the kind person.

Romans 12 is a turning point in Paul's message. Over his previous eleven chapters, he's laid the groundwork, teaching the Roman Christians his Gospel of God's inclusive grace and love. He's finished chapter 11 where he has argued away any thought of factionalism in the Christian community, and concluded by saying that all things (not just people) are from God, through God and [belong] to God.

Those eleven chapters included hints about how Paul thought we should choose to live in response to God's love. He saw us called to be a distinctly different community.^{6.12-14 & 8.5-13} So having wrapped up his Gospel of inclusion, love and grace, in chapter 12, Paul begins a sustained argument '... summoning Christians to live out the logical consequences of the *inclusive* Gospel that has taken hold of them.'^{Byrne}

³⁶¹ ^{12.1} So he begins, *I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable offering.*

Reasonable offering? Logical? The logic is that if God could save us through the gift of his Son, and if we've been convinced that God loves everyone, then we owe it to God to pay it forward; to declare that love to everyone we meet; to pay it forward as our thank-offering to God. Paul calls us to

do that through our thoughts, words and manner of living. We have to change. ^{12.2} *Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, (logic again) so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

We know Paul was presenting this challenge to a mixed community – Gentiles and Jews; people from every known nationality. What an undertaking! Even though there were cultural norms that most people around the Mediterranean might have subscribed to, and there were common laws imposed across the Roman Empire – even so, there were very strong cultural differences between the people who made up the Christian community in Rome; not least between the Jewish and Gentile Christians. Yet Paul argues that God's love embraces this diversity.

So today, we've heard Paul begin his argument with a focus on how we should relate to each other in a Christian community. He'll move on from there to the relationships we have with people outside the Church community. But all through his argument, his guiding principle will be the debt of love we owe to God. ^{5.8} *God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.*

We've experienced God's grace and love. We know that God loves everyone. So it's only right and fair that we should make that blessing available to anyone who doesn't yet know that God loves them. But what about our cultural differences; what about the way western Christianity has conducted a world mission which has been distorted by a misguided belief in our cultural superiority? Paul could only say we've been warned: ^{12.3} *... by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgement, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.*

Paul knows that this sort of insight isn't something that comes naturally to us. So he focuses us on our complementarity with his image of one body with many parts working together. Our Christian life is not expressed in our individuality, but through community; diverse gifts contributing to a mutual unity of God's purpose.

^{12.3} *[Do] not think of yourself more highly than you ought to think... Maybe a more helpful translation might be one which warns against trying to do the whole work of the Church on our own. What we take on, we must do in the strength of the community, and not in the strength of our own personal giftedness. Our gifts are given to be used, certainly, but always and only with the strength to work being drawn from God, and through God's chosen instrument, the whole Christian community.*

It's deeply frustrating at times, but Jesus didn't call experts. He called a community into being where everyone could receive the opportunity for growth and transformation. This is the meaning of Paul's vision of Church: ⁵... *we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.*

Let's pray that God's love may continue to shine through our community of St John's and that we continue to be living channels of God's blessing. Amen