



POSSIBILITIES AND DEPENDENCIES
SCRIPTURE: JEREMIAH 15: 15-21; ROMANS 12: 9-21
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
September 3, 2017

The Rev. Dr. Marcia Mount Shoop, Pastor

I have a question for you. I hope you will give me an honest answer. Tell the truth. Are you ready? How many of you spent at least part of your Saturday watching football? (show of hands)

Yes, football season is here. Oh, the joy of it all—crisp fall days and brand new uniforms. When yesterday morning started, everybody was undefeated and anticipating a great season with amazing possibilities.

Football season in our house meant a lot of things for a lot of years—excitement, dread, hope, despair. It was a season of extremes. If you win, you feel on top of the world—like you could do anything, like all is right with the world. Everybody is happy to see you, everybody wants to talk to you. The crowds cheer, the phone rings, the papers say you are smart and tough and amazing and maybe even unbeatable.

But if you lose, it feels like the whole world is against you—and actually a lot of the world is against you! Nobody wants to talk to you. Even family doesn't call to check on you. If the phone rings it's probably an angry fan. The crowds boo and shout out their rage and disappointment. The papers say you are an idiot, ill prepared, and you might not win a game all season.

Football is a game where there are winners and losers—no in between. There are no points for almost. There is not credit for effort. At the highest levels of football, where the stakes are the highest, one loss, one mistake can mean you are benched, you are cut from the team, or you lost your job if you are a coach. The fact that a loss teaches us lessons or builds character gets you nowhere in football.

Maybe that's why football is so attractive to so many—there is no room for ambiguity, there is no messy mercy. Winning is the key to happiness and success. And losers get what they deserve. We know who our enemies are and we know who is on our team.

There is a lot of clarity in such a winner-take-all world. There is something strangely comforting in that clarity. And it keeps people hungry for more—hungry for more winning.

Our faith, however, calls us into a much messier place—in the midst of all the winning the world tells us we need to strive for to be worthwhile people.

Last week we talked about the Rock—Peter—the flawed human being on which Jesus built his church. A man who knew he needed saving and knew Jesus was the one who could do it; a man who struggled to find the moral courage to follow Jesus to Jerusalem. He was a rock and a stumbling block, an ally and a betrayer.

And the wisdom of the lectionary takes us from Peter to Paul this week. If Peter was the rock, Paul was the glue.

Peter gave the church a founding rock on his strong profession of who Jesus is: “You are the Messiah.”

Paul stitched together the church with his passionate confession: “I was wrong. And you’ve got to meet this Jesus who changed my life.” The church is built on flawed human beings, yes. And the church is held together by our failures, and by our willingness to tell the stories of how Jesus heals our wounds.

Jesus changed Paul’s life. Paul stopped throwing stones, and started telling the truth about himself and his need for God’s love.

God calls on one unlikely messenger after another to cultivate the integrity of our faith. Paul was described in the Apocryphal Acts as “a small, bald-headed man with crooked legs but a healthy body, a long nose, and eyebrows that met.”¹ He was a strict Pharisee before his conversion. He studied with a renowned rabbi to learn about Torah. Despite his teacher’s generosity toward the burgeoning Jesus movement, Saul (not yet Paul) had little patience for the early Christian communities emerging around him. He became an aggressive, even violent opponent of them.

After Paul’s dramatic conversion moment on the Damascus Rd—a bright light, blind but now he sees, carried by the kindness of strangers, he becomes the opposition to those with whom he used to ally himself.

He lost his community, his identity, his way of understanding the world to follow Jesus. But this dramatic reversal, this profound set of losses did not leave Paul with a chip on his shoulder even if he retained but redirected his zeal.

Paul’s letter to the Roman church is not about girding for battle it’s about believing in the power of God’s grace to change everything—even the way we actually feel about things and feel about others—not just think.

The most important word in this passage for the Roman church is not “enemy” or “vengeance” or “hospitality” or maybe not even “love.” The most important word may be “genuine.” Paul is talking about a change in our hearts, in the way we actually feel about others, not just in our actions.

Christian values call us to engage in the struggle of letting our love be genuine—not writing people off because of disagreement or discord, but seeking in all circumstances to embody the love of Jesus Christ in our honesty, in our vulnerability, and in our openness to each other.

Genuine love has high expectations. It is not a martyr complex, but it is a powerful surrender to a belief that God’s grace can change us from the inside out.

Paul had been a person who thrived on winners and losers. Jesus transformed him into a person who could see he was always both. Following Jesus is about losing and gaining everything at the same time.

And Paul is clear—staying engaged with those with whom we disagree, even with those who persecute us, is what Christ calls us to do in our lives together.

This week has been a week full of engagement and conversation with so many of you. That engagement has been a welcomed change for me from the weightiness of what I have been carrying and the Session has helped to carry for the last several months.

Just since Monday I had the honor of talking face to face, by phone, or email or text with so many of you I lost count. Your engagement has been a blessing beyond measure. How to be a healthy community when there are barriers to honest conversation is work God calls us to do together.

The Session has been hard at work for months inviting conversation, seeking constructive engagement, because your elected leaders aspire to be a community defined by genuine love. There are things about our church culture that are very, very healthy, and there are things about our church culture that have diminished our health. Me sharing a problem with you last week is an effort to invite all of you in more substantively to the work of making us healthier.

This place is strong enough to be a diverse community. But even a healthy place like Grace Covenant is diminished when we do not have high expectations for a genuine love to define us. Feigned love and respect is not good enough. For love to be genuine, we should be able to trust it is extended to every single person here, by every single person here.

That is why we are here together in this messy and merciful space right now—because of high expectations for what God can do. Staying engaged means expecting a lot from each other.

Engagement with genuine love is not a one-way street. It is a possibility that can flourish only when we acknowledge how much we depend on each other to be honest, to grow, and to be transformed by Christ’s love.

You and I need to have high expectations for each other and for our community to truly profess our faith that God's grace can change everything. How we hold space for that transformation is our most important job as church in this divided and hostile world today.

Why is it so easy for Christianity to lose its way from a generous, grace-generated space and become about winners and losers. Maybe because we like things that way—black and white, no ambiguity.

The Nashville Statement (describe) issued this week by a group of Christian pastors and teachers (you can read the list online of who signed) shows us this distortion (of Christianity made to be about winners and losers) in clear relief.

Some Christians came together to say those who believe LGBTQ people are Christians are not real Christians. The Nashville Statement attempts to write Christians like us out of the faith. How is it that we let our love be genuine in the midst of such painful line drawing?

How do we “Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor” when mutuality is not present? How do we hold space in such a rejection for how God can work wonders when we stay engaged with our enemies?

Casting people out can feel easier than dealing with the discomfort of our failure to be who Christ has empowered us to be. But, Paul, the little bald guy with one eyebrow, is shouting and waving at us to see, to hear and believe the good news—Jesus isn't afraid of our messes—in fact that is where he really shines.

Jesus just needs us to be honest about our flaws and our failures—and let go of our impulse to think we are the ones who are going to fix it. Such messiness makes space for God's mercy and mystery to heal us—the demand it makes on us is the demand for truth, especially the truths that are hard to admit, hard to see.

Another sports season is underway—Cross Country. It doesn't draw the crowds that football does. And any cross country runner will tell you, there's no way around it—cross country hurts.

Distance running is not easy. But the great thing about cross country is that with pain comes the possibility of a vitality and health that feels so good when you get there—it depends on our willingness to believe that such vitality and health is worth the effort.

In Cross Country there are so many ways to win—you don't have to come in first, you can better your time, you can help your team with your place in the race, you can walk less, you can feel stronger, you can work up a hill or use a downhill to give you energy, you can push a teammate, you can work through the voices that tell you to give up, you can finish the race.

The only way to lose in cross country is to quit, to reject the belief that the hard work and the pain are worth it.

Following Jesus uses those muscles—the “you can keep going when it is hard” muscles.

And this table that we gather around today is where we are fed and thirst quenched so we can keep running this race together.

I can just hear Paul coaching us to keep working. Come on Grace Covenant, you can do it! “Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.”

Thanks be to God.

¹ Batey, R.A. *Letter of Paul to the Romans*, 9.