



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Asheville, North Carolina
23 August 2020
Sermon: Members One of Another
Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

Romans 12:1-8

Romans 12:1-8 (New Revised Standard Version)

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 spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

For 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 judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

[video, Fred Bahnson on composting: 2:38]¹

¹ Fred Bahnson, *Soil and Sacrament: A Spiritual Memior of Food and Faith* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013), 4-5. <https://youtu.be/A1NgiZP9whY?t=2408>. Footage used from Organic Gardening Zone 6, "Cover Crops: Another Look at Winter Rye, Hairy Vetch, and Crimson Clover." *Youtube*. May 26, 2017. <https://youtu.be/uexiAvPO0WA>.

We easily overlook the interconnectedness of creation, because it is the water in which we swim, the air that we breathe, the ground holding us beneath our feet. The microscopic weaving of plant roots, bacteria, and nutrients that Fred Bahnson describes in the making of compost illuminates the foundational connections knitting creation together, microbe to microbe, root to root, breath to breath, human to plant to animal. I wrote this sermon looking out of an office window at a lone tree swaying in the breeze, but the sermon taught me that the tree's isolation is an illusion. Not only are this tree's roots intermingling with the soil below, its leaves with the sun and atmosphere above, but standing alone, it is also deeply connected to every grounded thing for miles around. Microscopic fungi (fun-gai) particles run from plant to plant, touching and connecting root systems across distances, penetrating each at their fibers, making countless tiny holes that enable plants to absorb water and nutrients. Bahnson writes elsewhere in his memoir of two North Carolina scientists who poured radioactive liquid into the stump of a red maple tree in 1964.² A week later, they found radioactivity in the leaves of nearly half of all plant life within a radius of 22 feet. Creation is far more interconnected than it appears. We are far more interconnected to creation and to one another than we realize. Or, as Paul would put it, "We are members one of another."

² Ibid., 20.

This is what makes our time so perilous, and so promising. In media and politics, we rarely hear about the relationship between climate change and the pandemic, but the first is, in many ways, a cause of the latter. We have seen a number of crossover endemics in the past few decades: SARS, birdflu, H1N1, MERS, Ebola. Microbes, perhaps harmless to their host animal species, are making the jump more and more over to humans. The population explosion of the past half century, the destruction of natural habitats by urban expansion and climate change, and the crossover of novel diseases to the human community, are all deeply interlocked. Writing last month in *the Atlantic*, journalist Ed Yong's words summarizing these connections are breathtaking, "We have uprooted the planet's animals, forcing them into new and narrower ranges that are on our own doorsteps. Humanity has squeezed the world's wildlife in a crushing grip—and viruses have come bursting out."³ Friends, we see today creation's deep interconnection. Putting non-human lives at the risk of extinction puts human lives in peril. Or, as Paul would remind us, "We are members one of another."

And this connection, in fact, is grace. Paul writes, "We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith, ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in

³ Ed Yong, "How the Pandemic Defeated America." *The Atlantic*. Aug. 4, 2020.
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/09/coronavirus-american-failure/614191/>

generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.” And yet, in all such differences, “we, who are many, are one...members one of another.” There is a better harmony, a mutuality possible between humanity and creation, and between human and human. This “by the mercies of God,” is a way of life “good and acceptable and perfect.” “We, who are many, are one,” says the apostle.

Do think we actually believe it, that we are members of one another? On this Earth care Sunday, we confess, we have failed to treat creation in this way. We’ve failed to treat one another in this way. Today, if you are Black, you are twice as likely to be exposed to COVID than if you are white. If you are Latinx, you are three times more likely. If you are elderly or differently abled, you have heard rhetoric that says that your life is expendable in the name of the market. The virus jumped species and then thrived under generations of systemic disparities, neglect, and communal theft in our country. Our country has acted as if poverty only affected the poor, as if healthcare was luxury for the few, as if black lives did not matter, as if we did not belong to one another.

And so, Paul says, in fact, he begs his readers, “by the mercies of God, do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God.” Do not be conformed to ways of competition, the hoarding and theft of resources, the striving for power

and fame, the things that tear creation and community apart, as they are doing now. No, he says, you are members, one of another. In difference, nonetheless members one of another.

In his travels to various faith-based community gardens recounted in his memoir, Fred Bahnson visited The Lord's Acre farm, now known as the Roots Cause farm, down in Fairview, North Carolina. Early in the life of the community garden, the manager of the Lord's Acre, Susan Sides had a difficult conversation with a woman named Emma, who would take melons and okra from the garden at night. One day Susan came upon Emma in the midst of her unscheduled harvest. The conversation did not go well. Though Susan, the garden's manager, was inviting, Emma heard her as accusing. Bahnson summarizes, "The more Susan tried to make peace, even offering her a role at the Lord's Acre, the more Emma's shame turned to anger. She started yelling. Susan had never seen anyone get so angry... 'Fifteen years ago I would have retaliated,' Susan said... 'Five years ago I would have retreated. But by the sheer grace of God, I was able to absorb Emma's life rage as it poured out of her.'"⁴ That was in the early days of the Lord's Acre. By the time Bahnson visited, the dynamic had shifted. Emma had made peace with the Lord's Acre, after learning that the garden did not actually sell its produce but rather gave it away. She and Susan would later partner together for

⁴ Fred Bahnson, *Soil and Sacrament*, 85-86.

Emma to grow a garden in her own backyard. The Lord's Acre grew and reproduced itself.

At first, when I read Bahnson's story of Emma and the Lord's Acre, I was suspicious of it. The story has echoes of paternalism. The middle-class gardeners teach a destitute woman that she no longer has to be ashamed, that she can partner with them rather than steal. That interpretation isn't necessarily a bad one. There is partnership in it, openness and giving. But if it also limited if this is simply a story of the goodness of the Lord's Acre garden, and the lessons that poor Emma needed to learn. That interpretation steals Emma's own agency, her own power. It disregards the important lessons that she taught to the Lord's Acre.

There is another, more faithful interpretation. The deeper truth is that Emma saved the Lord's Acre by stealing from it, and then, by allowing *them* to partner with *her*. Her theft and the reconciliation were an invitation to the garden. Susan, the garden manager, admits, she was tempted to retaliate, to reject Emma upon their first meeting. Emma gave the gardeners a choice. They could have punished her or ignored her. They could have told her not to steal or to work for her produce. Emma made them choose between setting fences around their garden or trusting in community.

There is grace in what Emma offered them - Emma, in fact, invited the garden to be what it said it would be: a place of openness, community rather than

transaction and punishment, a place where all really are welcome, rather than an exclusive clubhouse. Emma invited the Lord's Acre to be a place that took the risk of real partnership without borders, rather than a vanity project of middle class good people or a charity that gets to set all the rules. In this way, Emma gave much more to the Lord's Acre than it could ever give to her. Grace Covenant, I've seen the same thing happen with our own community garden as well. If you have worked in it long enough, you have seen it too – invitations to authentic partnership and community not possible within the walls of our church. What could have just been a congregational project has become an open community space for the north side of Asheville. And in the years to come we can do that even more; by trusting in community, we now have a space in the church's front yard where can continue to reach out, and where others can reach out to us. We can learn from and partner with our neighbors.

This is what Paul means, when he writes, "in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function." This is the way the human community acts in a beautiful symbiosis that mirrors that of rye, clover, and vetch, each entwined with one another, each propping up the other, so that each may live. The story of Emma, Susan, and the Lord's Acre is, in its own small way, a brief and incomplete vision of the beloved community without walls, and without hierarchy, without borders and without currency, where we actually

partner with and really learn from each other, rather than treating one another and this earth as tools for our own dominance and consumption.

Siblings in Christ, we live today with the results of our species pretending as if we could control, manipulate, and simply take without return from creation and from one another as if there were no consequence. It is a time of great peril, yet it is also a moment of invitation to live differently, to live into the deep and essential truth that we are all intertwined, members one of another. May we remember that this is a grace on which our lives depend. Remember it, when you dig your hands into the soil, when you look into another person's eyes behind a mask, when you smile across a zoom call; remember it, in moments when despair draws near, or disdain for another, or apathy in the face of injustice. When the ways of this world obscure our fundamental truth, remember that we are members one of another. Thanks be to God.