

“Connecting the dots”
Romans 12:1-21

FirstMenno
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Over the years, you have heard me say hundreds of prayers ... with many of them beginning with “Our loving God” or some such wording that reminds us of the centrality of God’s mercy and grace. This way of addressing the Holy One invites us to sense and move more deeply into this incredible and unexplainable I-Thou relationship that we referred to last Sunday. To be sure there are lots of ways of addressing or referring to God, including some that highlight other aspects of the Holy One.

Some may well argue that all of our descriptors of God are hunches, well thought out surmises, though most are derived from scripture. Hopefully many of us also believe that within these scriptures we call the Bible we have a significant revelation ... though unfolding ... of who God is and how God has functioned and continues to function in the lives of some of God’s people.

The Bible offers us many names for God. No doubt some find lodging in your own soul over other ones, because of your background, experience, and/or study.

As one who too often growing up thought I likely needed to earn my parents’ love or approval (whether true or not is beside the point) and as one who even more desperately wanted God’s approval ... perhaps you can imagine how freeing it was (in my 30’s) to experience God’s incredible grace in the midst of a particularly difficult period in my life, and even later (thanks to Henri Nouwen’s writing) to see myself one of God’s beloved children ... in my case a son ... no matter what.

However, it is also true that during my growing up years I do not recall ever thinking that God did not love me. My problem was that I sometimes felt I must be a real disappointment to God because I

wasn't always able to live up to what I thought God might want from me. In those earlier years my way of showing God my sincerity and love was to try very hard to please God.

That is not all bad ... if properly understood and mixed with an incredibly keen understanding and experience of God's grace. It is not wrong to want to please the one/s you love and/or who loves you. But sometimes it is a thin line that separates us from thinking we need to earn God's favor.

So, how does one find a way to be a follower of Jesus, while being at peace and sure of God's love and mercy, and stay focused in offering our lives to God as the most spiritual worship and loving gift we can offer? I think this is an important issue for all of us congregationally and individually, whether we're 12, 17, 30, 50, 65 or 80.

Therefore I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, connect the dots. If you've not yet done so, accept God's loving offer. If this has been done at some previous time, embrace it more fully. Even before you've acknowledged it, already you were on God's list as one of God's beloved daughters or sons. But in claiming one's identity, be aware that we are also invited to live accordingly, no longer shaped and molded by what society and culture of the 21st century says ... but living a freed life that is energized and empowered by the Spirit of God.

Allow God's Spirit to renew and reform your thinking about yourself, about life and most of all about God. And as you offer yourself to this loving God, know that God is for you, now and will always be so; and that even now your life is being raised to a totally new level.

To help us connect the dots to what a loving and merciful God is offering us, and what such a life might look like as God's Spirit works

with us, we find Romans 12 to be of incredible value. What do we find there?

Don't think too high or too low of yourself; don't overestimate or underestimate the importance of the gifts/roles you might have in the community of faith ... the body of Christ ... the church. Understand that everybody has a place in Christ's body. There is room for many expressions, gifts, and callings in the church, as those are discerned and offered to God. The Work of the Church form we'll be distributing later in the service is one tool to help facilitate this ... but it is only a tool. The bulk of what the body of Christ is about and does can't be tallied on several sheets of paper, but this represents one aspect of our current church life. Who we are in Christ Jesus is more important than the gifts, callings and jobs we notice listed on our Work of the Church forms.

The marks or characteristics Paul believes to be important for a church and its various members/participants are worthy of our consideration. We've heard them read. Take them seriously as guides and goals. Also note that love is at the top of his list.

I find it fascinating that Paul also writes extensively about the shortsightedness and wrongness of Christians who think they have God's blessing to take revenge on their enemies; rather he encourages believers to bless those who might do us wrong. From a variety of vantage points, Paul argues that love is stronger and more effective in any and all conflict resolution than is cursing, being catty, and trying to do in one's enemies. He argues that we ought to overcome evil with good, not more evil. Never avenge yourselves. Feed your enemies; and give them something to drink if they're thirsty. Sounds like Sermon on the Mount teaching, doesn't it?

He writes this before starting Romans 13, where he talks about the church and her members' relationship to the governing authorities or

the state. There seems to be little question of which kingdom should get the higher allegiance. And it is not the Roman Empire or any other empire by whatever name ... though some American Christians cite Romans 13 as their biblical proof that we ought always obey the government authorities (at least ours here in the States) ... even over Jesus' teachings, though few would be able to see that is what they are doing ... or so it seems to me.

Paul concludes Romans 13 by saying, "Owe no one anything, except to love one another. Love does no wrong to a neighbor. All of God's commandments can be summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

To live as Paul encourages us to do ... we need each other's encouragement and gifts. We collectively are the church. This is where our gifts/talents/time & money offerings and who we are comes into play. We are not just individuals who need the services of a church community ... just as we are not members of a family because of how it can serve us. There always is always an interplay of things going on ... the dots are being connected to make our realities.

We have different abilities, gifts and talents; we have different histories and temperaments. We also have different interests and vocations. We have different social and family connections. We're different ages, colors, sexes, and have different financial abilities ... and have different levels and kinds of education ... formal and informal ... but there is a place and role for all of us (though not necessarily holding an office or having a position here at FMC). The church gathered ... is only one aspect of being the church ... though necessary and important in our time. But we are also the church scattered ... as we live and work in other roles. There too our gifts and talents need to find expression ... not just to earn a living or bring enjoyment to ourselves, but to reflect and serve the One we call Lord.

We indeed have a loving and gracious God, who invites us to join in the divine endeavor of bringing healing and hope to the world. We dare not be flippant about such a calling. We must connect the dots ... only then will the call of God become clearer to us and our true identity come into focus.