

## “The Three Be’s”

Sixty teenagers who were going on a three day retreat were asked to create a covenant that would govern their behavior while they were together. After one teen shouted out, “NO DRAMA” they got down to serious work and wrote a whole page of statements that they felt were important for their success as a group. They came up with things like, “Don’t talk while someone else is talking”, “Participate fully” and “Respect the leaders” and then they made copies of the pages and took them home, went over them with their parents and signed them before leaving. And several times on the retreat one or more of the teens needed to be reminded about the covenant.

Paul’s words in this passage of Romans could well be seen as a covenant for a faith community that wants to build their life together. After all, any group, even one brought together by common beliefs, will be made up of individuals with various gifts and eccentricities and this sort of covenant would help bring their gifts together in a beautiful symphony of praise to the Lord.

This would have been especially true for the church at Rome because Paul has, to this point, spent 11 chapters trying to convince them that God’s grace and mercy is extended to Jews *and* Gentiles alike. So where their different backgrounds may have simply been causing a cacophony of sounds, a mutual covenant could bring real harmony to a faith community.

Of course, what makes this passage relevant to us at Nazareth is that we, too, are a part of a faith community. And while we are not specifically Jews and Gentiles we came here today with different concerns and joys. We have different family circumstances and different

professional backgrounds. Some of us came from different denominations. Some grew up in households where faith was a very big part of our lives and others only prayed when Grandma and Grandpa came to visit. Our congregation is made up of people from different cultures, parts of the country, even people whose first language may not be English! Some of us like our vegetables crispy and then there are those who were raised in the south who know that the softer a green bean is, the better!

As I considered the many unique and beautiful parts of the body of Christ at Nazareth church, I remembered reading an article that said that churches are run by their constant preoccupation with the three B's – Buildings, Budget and Bodies. And I offered up a silent prayer of thanksgiving because, at that time, my ministry was in a Retirement Community and not in a church. So that meant that I didn't have to worry about those things.

But I guess God gets the last laugh because here I am. Moderating Session meetings and attending committee meetings where we are, indeed, concerned with those three things – Buildings, Budgets and Bodies. But after having served here a little over three months, I have decided that whoever wrote the article that I read, must never have served in a REAL church like this one. A church where other aspects of ministry are just as important as *those* three B's. Matters that I think we have developed and continue to work on quite well here at Nazareth.

In my translation of the Bible, the editors have written as the subtitle of Paul's passage that we just heard, "Marks of a True Christian". And while reading it, I found three OTHER BE's that I think are just as important to us in our faith community. Right in verse 12, Paul says we should **be JOYFUL IN HOPE, be PATIENT IN AFFLICTION and be FAITHFUL IN PRAYER**. What a covenant for us all to consider!

Let's look at the first one. Be joyful in hope. Honestly, it didn't make much sense to me at first glance. In fact, I wondered if Paul didn't mean be hopeful in joy? But Eugene Peterson has an interesting translation for this admonition. In The Message he says, "Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant." And I find that word "cheerfully expectant" to be a real key for my life as a servant of God.

I remember telling a friend once how someone's reaction had disappointed me so because I had expected something so different. She replied, "Well, there's your problem. You can't have expectations. If you do, you will ALWAYS be disappointed." I went away feeling so sorry for her and thinking, "What a sad way to live!" Because as Christians we know that God's word is filled with promises of the things we can expect.

To name a few. "Come to me all who are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest." "Do not be afraid, I am with you." "Seek and you will find." "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." "The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want." Friends, if I did not have the expectation that these promises can come true, there are days when I don't think I would even bother to get out of bed!

But I think Paul is emphasizing that it is one thing to SAY we believe in these promises and quite another to LIVE as if believe them. God wants us to EXPECT the best from him because HE KNOWS what is best for us. He wants us to be cheerfully expectant because HE provides for our needs to his perfect will. God does not want us to give lip service in our prayers and our actions when in our hearts we think nothing will ever change. So as a faith community, we can covenant to be joyful in hope, expecting the best that God can give us when we work together to seek God's solutions and God's will.

The next part of the covenant may be the hardest. Be patient in affliction. Frankly, I am often short on patience in the best of times. Honestly, I can be a little like Margaret Thatcher who said, "I am extraordinarily patient provided I get my own way in the end." So patience in suffering! Come on – who is good at that?

Then a story came to mind. I was visiting with a resident at Presbyterian Community once who told me something I will never forget. She is married to a retired Baptist preacher, one who was evidently well known for his ability to build up churches that were in trouble. They were also missionaries to Brazil and she herself was an educator who received national recognition for her work and has published two novels.

Now they are living in a Retirement community because he suffers from Alzheimer's disease and is living in the skilled nursing area – what many would call the "nursing home" part. She on the other hand is in Assisted Living. And while they are apart at night, she spends every morning with him. Their lives have completely changed.

She told me that, when they first came to Easley, it was so hard for her to go through the doors into the nursing home area where the condition of peoples' lives were so different. She felt so much sadness and every person she saw was a reminder of how her husband would change right before her eyes. She said that, every day, she would pray for God to show her his will before she went to visit.

One morning, as she entered those closed doors, the Lord spoke plainly to her and said that, while she was there she was to look for two things: how she could serve God in the midst of this crisis and how she could grow! Now friends, this dear saint is in her mid '80's! Yet, once she realized that she could still grow in her faith and still serve the Lord, even when she had not chosen this particular ministry, she received a peace that accompanies her each day when she

visits her husband. What a lesson she teaches us all about how being patient in suffering helps develop trust in the Lord.

For many of us, having a wait and see attitude is difficult. We want to spring into action when someone is suffering, especially someone we love. But patience means that we are willing to wait on the Lord to see how HE will work in and through the circumstances in our lives.

The morning that I was planning on finishing this sermon, my devotional that day said, "Living with confusion or unsolved problems is difficult. It is easier to resolve things. But making a decision too soon, doing something before it's time, means we may have to go back and redo it. If the time is not right, wait. If the way is not clear, do not plunge forward. If the answer or decision feels muddy, wait." (1)

So we can all expect great things from our God who loves us and wants what is best for each one here. We can also trust in the Lord to work all things for good, even when we suffer. And finally, we are called to be faithful in prayer.

I am certainly not an expert on prayer and even feel a little unqualified to preach about it today. But the more I ponder prayer and try to improve my prayer life, I realize that all the roadblocks to my faithful praying probably stem from the fact that I try to make it too complicated. There is after all NO right or wrong way to pray.

One of the most helpful books I have ever read about prayer is entitled Help, Thanks, Wow by Anne Lamott. Now, I will tell you right now that most of Anne's books are a little out there – even for me. But this book basically says that all of our prayers can fit into three categories: asking for assistance from God (help!), appreciating what we have that is good (thanks!), and feeling awe at the world around us (wow!). When prayed faithfully, these three prayers can be counted on to get us through the day and can show us the way forward.

And maybe some of you also struggle with prayer like I do. So I suppose that is why Paul lists in our covenant to be patient in affliction first. Because waiting on the Lord's will takes both patience and trust. And this leads in turning things over to God in prayer. How much more faithful can we be?

I remember once a few years back when I was going through a difficult time. I began praying that God would send just the right minister to me so that I could talk it out. I prayed very diligently for several weeks and then someone quite unexpected helped me understand my situation. I told her afterward when I was thanking her for her wise counsel, "You know I have been praying very hard for God to send the right minister into my path and I had narrowed it down to three people and YOU weren't one of them." She looked me straight in the eyes and asked, "Do you ALWAYS ask God for help and then tell him how to do his job?"

I guess each of us in our own way has to practice faithful praying. This means having the courage to step out into the unknown and rely on the sovereignty of God, knowing that God is answering our prayers according to His good and perfect will.

So yes, when we are a part of a faith community, we DO have to worry about the three B's – Buildings, Budgets and Bodies. But as a covenant people we can rely on God's wisdom to help us deal with these realities of living while we honor HIS three BE's: BE joyful in hope; BE patient in affliction; BE faithful in prayer. And leave the rest to God. In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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(1) The Language of Letting Go, Melodie Beattie, Hazeldon Foundation,

1990, pg. 258