

Honor All People: On the Occasion of My Parents' 60th anniversary
Rev Alida Ward, 8/4/19
Romans 12:9-17

So, this sermon begins with a little preamble, you might say.

A little backstory.

A little historical context.

Let me take you back to the year 1959, an even six decades ago.

To be more precise, let me take you back to August 4, 1959;

This very day, sixty years ago.

In the city of Charlottesville, Virginia,

a young couple woke up to see the sun shining on what would be their wedding day.

They were getting married in the town where the bride had grown up
before she'd gone off to college in Pennsylvania.

And at college she'd met a nice young math student.

And fallen in love.

And so it was that on that day, August 4, 1959, they were to be married.

Those two young people in love were my parents,

Jennifer and Thann Ward —

and today, yes, is their sixtieth wedding anniversary,

and today they're here with me in church.

Along with my sister and brother and our extended families.

So, with today being — obviously — a day of pretty exceptional importance in my family,

I'm taking a point of personal privilege for this Sunday's sermon.

I should add that my parents had no idea I was going to do this.

I want to tell you about the ways in which my parents' commitment to each other, to community, and to faith

have shaped the family they raised,

and more personally, have shaped my pastorate.

Because the truth is that who I am as a pastor

has been profoundly shaped by who I have as parents.

So let me start with the scripture you just heard read.

That was a little snippet from a letter that the Apostle Paul wrote to his friends, the Christians in Rome, way back when.

The letter to the Romans is a long letter, not unusual for Paul, And a pretty heavy letter too, theologically — there's stuff in there that great minds have been trying to untangle for centuries.

And towards the end of the letter, it's like Paul himself realizes that maybe he's made it too complicated,

so he says, all right, okay my friends, here's really all I need you to remember:

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor

If that sounds vaguely familiar, it's because you hear it from me at the close of every service I lead up here —

My usual benediction comes from Romans chapter 12.

Go out into the world in peace, I say to you, have courage, hold fast to what is good — return to no one evil for evil. Strengthen the fainthearted, support the weak, help the suffering, honor all people.

They are the words of benediction that I grew up with in the church my parents took me to —

But more than that, they are the words by which my parents have lived, And which they taught us, their children, to live.

Honor all people, Paul said.

Honor all people, my parents taught us.

And then they'd show us what that meant.

For instance.

“We're having dinner with new friends,” my parents would say.

“What new friends?” we asked.

“The family that just arrived from Korea,” my mom explained, “their kids don't know any other kids, so we're going to help make them feel at home.”

Which led, by the way, to more dinners,

and lasting friendships — and that was nothing unusual.

My mother even now teaches English as a second language to newly-arrived immigrants and refugees in Charlottesville,
Making them feel at home, and worthy, and welcome.
Honor all people.

That honoring of others shaped the way they traveled with us, too —
My parents took us all over everywhere as kids,
And yes, it was to see great things — castles in England, the Eiffel Tower —
But it wasn't just about things, it was about the people.
If you went to a castle, you also ended up in a long conversation with the woman who ran the castle gift shop.
and with the man selling you crepes on the streets of Paris on the way to the Eiffel Tower.

My parents show an interest in everyone —
which is why they now have dear friends in Wales, and Yorkshire, and Cyprus, and Frankfurt and Lord knows where else.
From them I learned, we learned, that *everyone* in God's good world is a sister, a brother, has a story worth hearing.
Honor all people.

Hold fast to what is good, Paul said.
My parents **do**. It's why they have always been among the first to stand up and speak out
for fairness, for justice, for mercy, for hope.

For instance - years ago now, I called home on a Saturday and asked what they'd done that day.

"They had something called a Pride Parade in Charlottesville today," my mom said, "so of course Daddy and I marched."

Of course they did.

And when the neo Nazis came to Charlottesville in August 2017 for the infamous and deadly Unite the Right rally,
my parents went downtown to march against *them*.

Of course they did.

Honor all people, the Apostle Paul wrote.

Have courage. Hold onto what is good.

I've learned that from my parents, whom I honor today.

And they learned it from their parents, and from the faith that strengthened them,
the faith of the community in which they raised us.

And for that, too, I honor them today —

for all of those Sundays that they put us in the back seat of our '66 Ford Falcon
and drove us to Westminster Presbyterian Church,
where we learned what it meant to BE church.

What we learned there was that to be church was, yes, to worship together.

But also to be interwoven into one loving community,

to know each other's stories,

To live into each other's lives —

To, as Paul also wrote,

Weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice.

Which meant, for instance, that if Mr. Updike was having surgery, then there were
church folk in the waiting room with Mrs. Updike.

And casseroles on the kitchen table.

It meant that there were Sunday evenings when we all got together at church to have a
potluck supper just because we liked to be together — and yes, there was always a
green jello mold from someone.

Church also meant that if you were a socially awkward teenager who was definitely
not one of the cool kids, there was a youth group where people made you feel
welcome.

And church was where, at the end of every service,

we were reminded by the minister to go out into the world in peace,

Have courage, hold fast to what is good — and honor all people.

My parents made sure we knew what church was,

what goodness and mercy meant,

what a faith community looked like,

what a lived faith looks like.

So for raising us right, and raising us in faith, I'm thanking my parents publicly today

—

But most of all I'm thanking them for living lives before us that have shown forth that faith. And still do, every day.

All of this, all that you've heard, has profoundly shaped who I am as a pastor, the pastor that you've seen grow up in front of you for three decades.

I turned up here in the summer of 1989,
right about now, actually.

And in the thirty years that I've been here,
everything I've worked on building here with you has been shaped by what I've
learned from those two people there, and the church they raised me in.

What we try to do here together, you and I,
is exactly what I've talked about.

We try to be a place where, truly, all people are honored,
where we hold fast to what is good.

A place where we weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice.

This is a church in which we live into each other's lives
through prayer and love and support and laughter, too.

We believe in showing up in that hospital waiting room,
or at the front door with flowers from the altar.

We'll also happily gather together just to eat chili — not so much green jello — or at
the beach to hang out together.

This is also a church which gathers up furniture and pots and pans for a refugee family
just arriving,

and sends hundreds to build houses in Appalachia.

A church that hosts gatherings of people to talk and learn about what matters,
everything from gun violence, to what's happening in China to an iftar in the
Memorial Room hosted by Muslim friends.

Honor all people, we believe — learn, and respect, and love and honor.

We are also a church that welcomes every teenager,
because you're led by a pastor who was welcomed herself
and so it matters to me, just as it matters to you.

All of this matters to me ...

And as I thank and honor the parents who shaped what I believe,
I thank this church for being a place that has allowed me to live out those beliefs —
David and I and all of you together,
we work every day to be a shining light on this hill that tells the world:
Hold fast to what is good,
return no evil for evil,
honor all people.

I'll close with a little story — which, my parents will be relieved to hear,
is *not* about Jennifer and Thann Ward.
I think I've embarrassed them enough by now.

This is a story from five days ago, from Tuesday of this week.
David, as you've heard him tell you many a time,
fell in love several years ago with the small city of Bratislava,
the capital of Slovakia. Eastern Europe.
Every year since then, he's spent a couple weeks there for his writing sabbatical.
And there's a Franciscan church there that he loves to worship in.
Many of you know the next part of this story.
Last year, just before Christmas,
the priests and youth group of that Bratislava church contacted us,
asking if by chance we could host them for three days,
on their way to the Catholic Youth Celebration in Panama.
Long story about how Fairfield ended up being on the way to Panama —
but anyhow, in January we did indeed host them,
and a group of amazing Greenfield Hillers, led by Linda and Andy Allegretti,
turned our Len Morgan Youth Barn into a home away from home for 18 Bratislavans.
Many of you remember them worshipping with us in church that Sunday.

Which brings me to last Tuesday.
David and I were in Bratislava, on the last day of our vacation.
Well, last day of MY vacation — David's still in Bratislava.
and on Tuesday, those priests and those young people took us out to lunch to say
thank you.
(Pretty good deal — Andy and Linda Allegretti did all the work,
and David and I got the free lunch in Bratislava.)

So we're there, gathered around one big table, eating Slovakian pizza —
and Father Josef,
the head of the group, begins to speak.

And what he says is this:

That his time in this church last January was everything to him.

That it had opened his eyes to what church could truly be.

He talked about the welcome they had experienced.

He talked about standing in this church and feeling, he said, what the community of Christ is supposed to be.

And as he now leaves his church to begin a new pastorate,
he is taking with him a new vision, he said, inspired by what he felt here.

That's what you, Greenfield Hill, have created here.

That's what I've been honored to share in with you for thirty years now.

And what I'm telling you today is —

That's the stuff I learned from Mom and Dad.

Amen.