

Serve the Time!"
Romans 12:9-21
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It was St. Anselm of Canterbury that first recognized the apostle Paul as a great mother of our faith. You heard me right. Anselm, drawing on the maternal imagery used throughout Paul's letters, prayed to Paul "our greatest mother", remarking "O St. Paul, where is he that was called the nurse of the faithful, caressing his children? Who is that affectionate mother who declares everywhere that she is in labor for her children." Beautiful, isn't it?!

Now I'm not sure about you, but I heard a lot of sermons on Paul's letter growing up. And, to be honest, he gave me a headache. I didn't experience Paul as motherly. Not in the least. Paul put me on guard. Paul was a weapon used by a particular brand of Christianity to bludgeon the rest of us into submission. It has taken me some time, some seminary courses, a PhD dissertation, in fact, to see Paul the way Anselm did. Now, however, when I go to Paul's letters, I lean in in anticipation of learning from Paul something of use for Christian discipleship today. With this text in Romans 12, I lean in, eager to imagine myself present among the gatherings of Christians in Rome, listening intently as sister Phoebe stands up to read Paul's letter, raising her voice to be heard among the smells and sounds of daily life, like those of the wet nurses in attendance with their young charges, whose fussing and cooing continually sprinkled the reading of Paul's letter. I invite you to put yourself there with me. Let us lean in together so we can really hear what the Spirit wants to say to us today through Paul.

And as we lean in, let us even imagine ourselves there; let us hear Phoebe relay how Paul is writing from a place of "great sorrow and unceasing anguish" (9:2). Paul has been "longing" to visit so that there might be some mutual encouragement (1:11-12). Paul is trying hard to communicate his deep pathos—he so desires to offer some kind of mutual encouragement in the face of a shared and deeply discouraging situation of trying to follow the crucified Messiah Jesus in an age of empire.

Mother Paul was painfully aware of the way Rome's *imperial ideology* identified the emperor as both lord and savior, all the while bringing crosses, crippling taxes, agricultural exploitation, economic destruction, war, and violence wherever it went.

Given the great upheaval in our culture, the threat facing our planet, the systemic oppression of white supremacy, the deep political divides that threaten to tear us apart, even in the midst of a global pandemic, and the hemorrhaging of the mainline churches in North America, we know that we, too, are in need of mutual encouragement as we struggle to follow Jesus in our own day and age.

Mother Paul is steadfast in calling Jesus followers not to be conformed to the evil ways of "this age" (12:2). Instead, the battered and weary disciples of Jesus, living in the midst of

political oppression, are called to share together in a communal life that is deeply counterintuitive for survival in an empire like Rome. For you see, the shape of our communal life together matters critically in light of what time it is (13:11).

Knowing the time is a prominent theme in Paul's letters. He says that "the night is far gone, the day is near" (13:12). While Nero's poets had declared the dawning of the new Augustan age as an age of peace and security, Paul knows this Augustan age is stuck in the night. And so he wants Jesus followers to live as if they are in the day; not mimicking the empire in a life of excess, violence, and insatiable consumption (13:13). Paul's understanding of time is shaped entirely by the life, ministry, cross and resurrection of Jesus. Now is the time of the radical inbreaking of God's grace and redemption into the old era of evil and sin.

Our passage for today is connected to Paul's understanding of time. You heard me read an alternative to verse 11b's "serve the Lord." If your bible has a footnote for this, it alerts you to the fact that some of our text manuscripts read "serve the opportune time!" Most commentators ignore this textual variant. The great Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth, whose Romans commentary was the subject of my dissertation, is the exception to this rule. Barth's comments on this alternative "serve the time" reading are not only fascinating but also highly instructive. First, he startles us with his insistence that the "demand that people should "serve the Lord" seems to him to be, in the context, a quite intolerable generalization. In fact, he apparently feels so strongly about this contested translation "serve the time" that he urges to retain the reading "serve the Lord" is *insipid*.

Intolerable!? Insidious!? We might wonder at Barth's strong feelings. But consider this. At the time of his writing, Barth was serving as a pastor in Safenwil, Switzerland, where he was known by locals as the Red Pastor for his work with the town's union factory workers who faced economic exploitation by the wealthy elite who owned the factories. And so maybe *pastor* Barth had been around the block a few times—the church block. Maybe he knew that the idea of "serving the Lord" can become a smokescreen, an excuse, a way to evade responsibility for pressing in deeply to the particular challenges of our time; really living and walking in the world as Jesus did in the face of the empire forces aligned against the gospel.

One way to understand the potentially problematic idea of "serving the Lord" is to consider the story of Mr. Stevens, told in one of my favorite books turned film, the 1993 British-American drama "The Remains of the Day." In the movie, the marvelous Anthony Hopkins plays the lead, Mr. Stevens, who is the head butler in a great house in England in the 1930s. So dedicated is Mr. Stevens to his staff role, fulfilling every directive of the exacting aristocratic master of the estate, that Stevens forgoes staying by the deathbed of his father in order to orchestrate an elegant dinner to which his boss has invited an array of internationally influential fellow aristocrats—many of them German. Mr. Stevens lives to serve, which means overlooking both his father and the transpiring politics at this elegant dinner party. On other occasions he overlooks clear evidence of his employer's Nazi sympathies and growing anti-Semitism. When Stevens' employer discovers that two newly hired housemaids are Jewish and demands that they be sent back to Germany, Mr. Stevens dutifully sees to it. Years later, retired by now and living with growing remorse, Stevens is

questioned in a pub as to whether he knew what was going on at the elegant dinner tables of his employer. Stevens bows his head slightly, then looks up and says: "My job was to serve, not to listen, not to question."

Far too many Presbyterian churches have been a little too much like Stevens the butler. Stay out of politics, tiptoe around the difficult subjects, hide in the busyness of church programs. There are plenty of ways to keep busy with good 'ole church work—serving the Lord—especially when we must always do it "decently and in order."

So easy is it to spend time keeping busy with our church stuff that Christian author and speaker, Brian McClaren, decries the irony of how the many problems in the church (you know, the ones that take up all our time in Session meetings and presbytery gatherings) are far too often not even remotely related to the real life and death problems of our world that the "church called out" should be addressing.

I suspect someone like Barth knew how easily "serving the Lord" becomes a rationale for ducking difficult conversations—like those about systemic racism; skirting thorny issues—like the reality of the missing generations in our churches; not to mention avoiding putting our lives on the line to stand up against the death-dealing forces of empire in our day.

Pastor Barth was wise to church folk like us. He knew the compromises, the rationalizations, the accommodations being made among both the clergy and congregants alike in Switzerland. He knew that staying busy "serving the Lord" allows us to remain comfortable in our well-worn rhythms and patterns and keeps us from having to risk, having to change, having to repent, if we are to truly "serve the time."

So let me invite you to imagine yourself addressed one last time by mother Paul. This time, imagine a modern-day Phoebe with us today, reading the themes in Romans 12:9-21 in light of today's pressing issues. I can hear her saying something like this:

Let's begin by getting beyond a pious sentimentality of love.

If love is genuine,

If love is to be more than what Tina Turner says is a "secondhand emotion,"

Then to deeply love we must learn how to hate what is evil.

That means that love requires the naming of names.

Love is not about being nice.

When we see something evil,

we must, as Congressman Lewis told us,

say something and do something.

If we are to love in a time of hate,

Then we need to paradoxically hate that hate and name it for what it is.

If we are going to love women,

We must hate misogyny.

If we are going to love our Sikh and Muslim neighbors,

We must hate xenophobia.

If we are going to love the Indigenous peoples of this land,

We must hate colonialism, its persistent wound, and seek to make reparations for the many ways that we white folks remain the beneficiaries of colonial systems.

If we are going to love our LGBTQIA+ siblings,
We must hate homophobia and transphobia and then set about the work of making our radical welcome explicitly known and celebrated.

If we are going to love our black and brown siblings, then we must proclaim that their lives matter and work to dismantle structural racism which seeks to profit us at their expense.

If we are going to love generosity and equality,
we must hate the economic structures that willingly sacrifice the poor and denounce the US caste system that enriches the very few at the expense of the very many.

You see, my friends, genuine love really isn't that complicated.
Counter-imperial love hates what is evil and holds fast to what is good by outdoing one another in showing honor, most especially to those who are most dishonored in society: whether that be children, the elderly, black trans women, those whose home language is not English, those who are poor, and all the others marginalized by our society.

Here is what I want you to do:
Associate with the lowly.
Walk with the oppressed.
Give preference to the voices of the poor.
Replace exploitation with affection.

While the forces around you will wear you down
Don't give in,
Hold each other up,
And as you labor, don't forget to take a deep breath and then, push.
Be a community of spiritual vitality against the odds.
Exercise the gift of encouragement
As if your life depends on it,
Because your life does depend on it.

Never give up praying, friends.
Without prayer, we're done for.

Remember generosity.
Care for the needs of the community,
But don't stop there.
Extend hospitality
To strangers as well.
Providing homes to those whose families have kicked them out,
Offering hospitality to those who have no community,
Sanctuary for those who fear deportation,
Welcome for those who would be banned,
Refuge for those who are targeted and profiled.

May we, together, hear what the Spirit is saying to the church! Let us serve the time! Amen!