

Soul Strengtheners

Romans 12:9-21

September 3, 2023

First Presbyterian, Luling

I'm a list maker. I can't remember if I've told you this before. The running grocery list is always posted on the fridge, in the vain hope that someone besides me will write a needed item on it. I have lists of places I'd like to go hiking, books I've read, books I want to read, suppers I want to cook when I can't think of something to cook. You get the idea. But the queen of all my lists is the to-do list. When I'm feeling busy or overwhelmed, I make a new list weekly. It helps me feel like things are manageable.

The to-do list is broken down into categories, typically: Luling, Presbytery, home. Presbytery tasks have dwindled, so that category has recently disappeared. Some tasks on the list are easily accomplished: laundry, every week. Easy enough, not complicated, doesn't require a whole lot of coordination with other people.

There are other tasks though, that linger, that get written over and over for many weeks in a row. Sometimes it's a phone call I don't want to make. Most of the time, it's a task that is too complicated, too complex, for one listing on a to-do list. The one that is currently lingering is "organize email inbox." Back in the good old days, I had a very organized inbox. Each email only stayed in the inbox until I answered it. Then it got filed into clearly delineated categories. That system fell by the wayside sometime in the early days of the pandemic, when emails were coming fast and furious, and I was chasing my tail in several different directions at one. I'd answer an email and move to the next one, without filing them. It soon ballooned out of control. At the present moment, there are 7,905 unfiled emails in my inbox. I've dealt with them and answered them, but they're just virtual clutter, like that big stack of papers on the side of the desk. I have time to do this task. I know how to do this task. I just don't want to. It's tedious and time consuming, and some of them are so old I'll have to reread them to figure out which file they need to go to. It's a complicated task, and it's followed me from week to week on my to do list for quite a while now.

Our passage from Romans this morning reads like a to-do list, full of tasks like "organize email inbox." Meaning, complicated, complex tasks that will take a lot of time. Only this list's tasks are far more consequential than whether my inbox goes to 7,906 or not.

I'm going to read it again, slowly. Imagine each item has a little checkbox next to it on your to-do list. "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. Do not lag in zeal. Be ardent in spirit. Serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope. Be patient in suffering. Persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints. Extend hospitality to strangers." That's just the first paragraph.

"Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. Live peaceably with all. Never avenge yourselves. Feed your enemies. Give them something to drink. Do not be overcome by evil. Overcome evil with good."

That is quite a list. There's nothing easy on it. None of those items are easy. I think the one that comes most easily for me, and the one I've seen you do well, is "Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep."

These are all grammatical commands, things that Paul is instructing the Romans to do. These are the things that describe a Christian community. All these hard things.

Jesus says much the same thing, in fewer words. Love your enemies, he says. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength. And love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus's commands aren't any easier to carry out, though.

These commands in Romans all boil down to: love everyone, even when you don't want to.

Last week, I clearly said that strengthening our souls is something that God does, not something that we do. This is the second time in a month that I've gotten myself in trouble with something I said the week before. Not really trouble. But I painted myself in a corner. If God is strengthening our souls, then why do we need to make this to do list of things that will strengthen our souls. That's what it is, this list. Doing these things, even imperfectly doing them, will strengthen our souls.

The answer is that the only way we can even approach doing this list is that God gives us the spiritual strength to do so. God gives us the strength to work on strengthening our souls. Love everyone, even when you don't want to, because God wants you to, calls you to, enables you to.