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Marked

A sermon on Romans 12:9-16 (first of two parts)

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Last Sunday, we read 1 Corinthians 12:12-27, and talked about how before we are men or women, or Americans or Canadians, or Republicans or Democrats or any other classification, we are first and foremost members of the body of Christ. I described how each member of the body of Christ is vitally important because each member has something unique and important to contribute and without it, the body can't be and do everything it's supposed to.

This applies not just to individuals within a congregation but to all churches in every time and place that make up the larger body of Christ. Catholics, Baptists, Pentecostals, Eastern Orthodox, independent churches with no denomination at all—and yes, Presbyterians, too—have gifts and strengths that the larger body of Christ needs. We stressed how important it was to stay connected with other believers who are VERY different from us, including Christians who are more conservative or liberal than us, and Christians from different cultural backgrounds, as well as all the people in our own congregations who for whatever reason just happen to really annoy and offend us. And then I promised we would continue that conversation this week by talking about things we can do when we find ourselves clashing with or avoiding other members of the body.

Now the first part of Romans 12, which Bob Baer read, sounds a lot like the passage from 1 Corinthians that we looked at last week. One body, many members, lots of different gifts, and for the record, it is important to point out that the list of gifts Paul provides here is not meant to be all-inclusive, but just a sampling of spiritual gifts that people might have. Did you all hear about that nun who went outside after the hurricane wearing her full habit, longskirts, headpiece,

the whole shebang. And she saw that some fallen trees were blocking the road and causing problems, so she grabbed a chainsaw, looked up how to use it on Google, because she couldn't remember how to start it, and got to work. That's a spiritual gift right there. The ability to see a need and do what needs to be done for the sake of others—that's at least as important as prophecy, if not more so. I'm so thankful that we have so many folks with that gift here in this congregation.

Well, the second part of Romans 12, which I just read, spells out what it really looks like to live every day as a member of the body of Christ, where some of the members are incredibly wonderful. They see things just like you and think you are wonderful, too. Other members see things so differently that you'd just as soon turn around and walk out the door. I read earlier from the NRSV, but I'm going to read verses 9-16 again, this time from the Common English Bible, and see if you can count how many actions Christians are instructed to take in these verses. It's OK to count on your fingers if you need to (I do that all the time), or make tally marks on your bulletin.

Love should be shown without pretending. Hate evil, and hold on to what is good. ¹⁰ Love each other like the members of your family. Be the best at showing honor to each other. ¹¹ Don't hesitate to be enthusiastic—be on fire in the Spirit as you serve the Lord! ¹² Be happy in your hope, stand your ground when you're in trouble, and devote yourselves to prayer. ¹³ Contribute to the needs of God's people, and welcome strangers into your home. ¹⁴ Bless people who harass you—bless and don't curse them. ¹⁵ Be happy with those who are happy, and cry with those who are crying. ¹⁶ Consider everyone as equal, and don't think that you're better than anyone else. Instead, associate with people who have no status. Don't think that you're so smart.

I don't know about you, but I counted 19 different actions in here. Nineteen things to do that help us live in unity in the body of Christ and to show that unity to the world. Nineteen things that help us be who we really are. And keep in mind we aren't even touching verses 17-21, which Pat will preach on next week.

Now, depending on what translation of the Bible you are reading, and how many little notes and things it has in it, you'll probably notice that different sections have different headings over them. So in one Bible that I have, the heading over Romans 12:9-21 says, "Love in Action." In another Bible, the heading over the whole chapter says, "How to Behave." But the Bible I use the most gives these verses this title: "Marks of the True Christian."

I read that heading, and I immediately thought, "Tattoos." For those of us who have been around for a while, it's important for us to understand that attitudes about tattoos have changed dramatically in the last decade or so. Did you know that one in five people has a tattoo, and that 36% of Americans age 18-25 have at least one tattoo? Did you know that tattoos have been around for at least 8,000 years? ("History of Tattoos" video on youtube, by Addison Anderson). And did you know that the tattoo industry is the 6th fastest growing retail business in America? There's a saying that, "You used to get tattooed to be on the outside, and now you get tattooed to be inside."

I called my 22 year old daughter Madeleine, who started getting tattoos several years ago and now has a full complete sleeve of them, or close to it. Her tattoos are gorgeous works of art with brilliant colors and intricate details. Some of them are very meaningful to her, like the mountains on her forearm, which remind her of Estes Park, and the scissors which symbolize her love of her chosen career in cosmetology, and the squirrel in honor of her dad, who still calls her Squirrel. Some are just for the sheer joy of it, like the big hot air balloon on her leg. I said, "Madeleine, talk to me about your tattoos." And she said, among other things, "Well, they're part of who I am now. They're part of my skin, and I love that I always have this beautiful art as part of me, and it doesn't wash off. I'm proud of them. Sometimes I'll be giving an old man a haircut, and he'll look at me and say, 'Why did you do that to yourself? Don't you know that's

permanent?’ But even when I’m older,” says Madeleine, “I’ll always be glad to look back and remember how much these things meant to me.”

We also talked about the pain that you go through to get a tattoo, because you do have to sit there for quite a while as somebody injects dye under your skin with a needle. When it’s all done, you have to take care of the tattoo for a couple weeks, because it’s essentially a wound in your body. Also, tattoos aren’t free. They are definitely an investment. And when it comes to the tattooer, you definitely want to make sure that you go to an experienced, talented artist who really knows what they’re doing. Madeleine describes feeling a respect and connection with the artists who have etched out their creative visions on her flesh.

Now, I am not advocating for tattoos here—goodness only knows what the long-term effect of all that ink in our bodies will be, and I pray that all shall be well for my daughter and everyone else who is expressing themselves in this way. But I do think that the marks of the true Christian are a little bit like tattoos. Only instead of ink under the skin, our marks are love in action. Our marks are the way we treat each other, the way we treat strangers when we think nobody else is watching, and the way we treat people who really “get under our skin.”

Acquiring these marks can hurt! It hurts to love genuinely, because when we really, really love someone, it means we have made ourselves vulnerable. They can hurt our feelings, and betray us. They can die, and we are left to suffer all the pain of loss and loneliness. It hurts to bless someone who persecutes us. It can hurt to show honor to someone when I feel like I’m underappreciated, and I don’t know about you, but being patient in suffering is one of the hardest things I’ve ever done (I’d probably get a solid D+). It costs something to show hospitality to a stranger—it’s so much easier to show it to people we already know. It’s painful to realize that we aren’t as wise as we thought we were. It just about kills me when I have to admit that I was

wrong. But the wounds heal, and leave us with something wondrously beautiful that won't wear off. Something that's part of us—something we can be proud of.

Our marks are like tattoos in that just like a tattoo is something you have to receive in your person, from another person, these actions all involve personal connection. To receive these marks, we have to show up. We have to show up for our time with God in worship and in private prayer. We have to show up to live in harmony with others—we can't do it by just listening to a TED talk or reading a book about it. We don't get these marks by thinking about them, but by doing them.

The 19 actions and attitudes that we are given in Romans 12:9-16 are both an expression of the unity that is already ours as members of the body of Christ, AND they are actions that add clearer lines and more brilliant color to the masterpiece that God the Master Artist is continually etching onto the body of Christ. Because when the world does not see us members of the body of Christ living out these 19 things, the lines get blurry and the colors get dull, and it becomes very difficult to see the body of Christ in the world.

So I invite you this week to do something with me. So far we have found 19 marks of the true Christian, and next week Pat will help us find some more. This week, spend some time reading through this list. Read it in your Bible, or find it very easily on a website like biblegateway.com. You're looking for Romans 12:9-16.

As you sit with this list, see if God is directing your attention to one of these 19 things more than the rest. And then, your task is to just do it. Just get out there and do it. If you really get stuck, here's my suggestion: pick #19: "do not claim to be wiser than you are." To me that means, don't think you've got all the answers and don't close yourself off to other insights. So one way you could live that out would be to pick a controversial issue that you feel strongly

about, like immigration or abortion or public schools, and deliberately spend the week seeking perspectives that are different than yours. Watch that other news channel. Read that other newspaper. Find someone who disagrees with you and just listen to them, without interruption and without defending your own point of view. Be curious, be kind and ask them questions.

Whatever you choose, be prepared—it might hurt. It might cost you something. But the mark it leaves behind will be amazing. And the whole body of Christ will be better because of it. Amen!