

## *“A pep talk for the second half”*

**August 31, 2008**

*Text: Romans 12:9-21, Matthew 16:21-28*

### I.

Our reading from Romans this morning, immediately, gets right to the heart of the **Christian life**. Listen again:

*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 ... be ardent in spirit ... rejoice in hope ... be patient in suffering ... persevere in prayer.*

This gets right to it ... direct language that goes right to the core of who and what we are to be as **Christians**. And there's more ...

*Bless those who persecute you ... live in harmony ... don't be haughty or condescending ... do **NOT** repay evil for evil ... live peaceably with all ...*

When we can catch our breath for a few reflective moments to let these promptings settle in, how can we help but be moved? That's the Christian life! ... that kind of life can change the world.-

I don't know about you, but I want to be inspired in life. I want to have my vision lifted, my heart touched, my spirit filled ...

### II.

As I was reading these words from the second half Romans 12 and thinking about how they must have been heard and received by the Apostle Paul's listening audience, I found myself agreeing with **Thomas Neufeld**, author of a recent book, *Recovering Jesus, the Witness of the New Testament*.

Neufeld shared that, for him, these verses were like a *locker-room PEP TALK*. Well, as a sports guy, the more I thought about it, I think that's a good analogy. Nothing wrong with a PEP TALK.

- PEP TALKS are motivational. They fire you up so you can tap in to your best.
- In writing to the Romans, a community of new Christians Paul had never met, certainly, he wanted to be as motivational as he could. More on that later.

But for us, with the serious challenges that are before us, there's a lot to like about a PEP TALK.

1. With a struggling economy and enduring uncertainty over gas prices ... food prices ... what the housing crisis will mean for us all—long term ...
2. the war in Iraq, which we're exhausted at hearing about, but which we can't ignore because of the \$10 billion price tag/ per month and the enormous drain on our national spirit ...
3. and of course an historic Presidential election which will no doubt get more than a little contentious before the bell sounds for the final lap over the next two months.

In these times, and whatever it is that we're dealing with, don't we need to be inspired, encouraged, and have our hopes lifted? And don't we need to be reassured around our most sacred values and rededicated to our most vital commitments? Don't we want to feel the power and the grace of the **Christian life** to sustain us and give us hope?

As some of you know, in my writing (articles or sermons), I'm big on titles. In fact, I am paralyzed in my writing, if I don't have a title. Whether it's an article or a sermon—whatever it is—I have to have the title before I can launch into it.

A **Pep talk for the second half** is different from a pep talk for the first half. By the time the second half comes along, the game is already half over. The talk before the first half (or, before the game) is more motivational; it's less desperate. You've got the whole game before you.

By the second half, it's time to get going. It's time to lay it all out there. There's a sense of *urgency* involved. It's time to give *the best you've got* and all you've got.

### III.

In putting together his **Epistle to the Romans** ... which, you may recall, was Paul's final letter. (It was also, for Paul, his most developed theological thinking) ...

... in the shaping of this letter, chapter twelve is like a culmination of the first eleven chapters. It is a *presentation of the Christian life*.

The first eight verses of **chapter 12** are like the *first half*, sticking with the metaphor we're using. These verses were one of our scripture readings from last week. They highlighted **WHAT IT MEANS** to be a Christian:

1. ***Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds ... so you may discern what is the WILL of God ...***
2. And how, ***as one body, we have many members, and not all the members have the same function ... we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: some are prophets ... some teachers ... and others helpers of all kinds.***

This is the *first half* of Romans 12. And now, in the *second half*—our reading for this morning—Paul moves beyond what the Christian life means to **HOW TO DO IT?**

Here, again, much like a **Pep talk for the second half**, Paul wants to make sure they *get it*. Again, he's already laid out what it means to be a Christian; now he wants to make real clear HOW TO DO IT?

In other words, *how to LIVE it*; how to BE Christian. For Paul, in his letter to the Romans (sticking with the sports metaphor), it's crunch time.

#### IV.

I have vivid memories of *half time* speeches on football and basketball teams I've played on—mostly basketball. The coach is trying to touch every vital nerve he can.

1. He wants to energize you, pump you up ... call the best out of you ...
2. He wants to put things in context so you realize your potential ... in other words: that you can do it ... that you have what it takes ...
3. He wants you to remember, too, who you are ... and how hard you've worked ... and how, if you play together as a team, everybody doing their part, you can win.
4. But mostly, he wants to fire you up ... push every motivational button he can. Again, it's the *second half* and there's not much time left.

Paul's PEP TALK has a lot of these same ingredients. Certainly—*calling the best out of his people* and *remembering who you are as Christians*.

***Let love be genuine ... hate what is evil ... hold fast to what is good ...***

In a small, rural community around Christmas time, there was some extra food left over from the preparations of the Christmas baskets. The minister thought he'd take the food to a poor family living on the edge of town.

Driving up to their house, he was trying to think of a way of offering the food without, somehow, stripping away the dignity of the family.

When the woman answered the door, with her several children close behind, he said to her: *Do you know anyone who could use some extra food*, hoping this was a tactful way of offering her the food.

*You bet*, she said. And she got her coat, headed toward her car, and said, *Follow me*. And as the minister tells it: *she took me to a family who were poorer than she, who desperately needed the food. She never batted an eye; no calculation about anything.*

*Let love be genuine ... hold fast to what is good ...*

V.

There are things we can do everyday to make a difference in people's lives. Going on, Paul says—to the Romans and to us:

*love one another with mutual affection ... Rejoice in hope ... be patient in suffering ... persevere in prayer ... be hospitable to strangers ...*

Always, our lives as Christians are about compassion and love; they're about getting beyond ourselves, thinking and acting *outside the box*, and lifting up the common good.

The great leader of India, Mahatma Gandhi, stepped aboard a train one day ... and as he did, one of his shoes slipped off and landed on the train track. As the train pulled away, he was unable to retrieve it. Whereupon, to the amazement of his companions, Gandhi calmly took off his other shoe and threw it back along the track, landing it close to the first.

Asked by a fellow passenger why he did that, Gandhi smiled. *The poor man who finds the shoe lying on the track, he said, will now have a pair he can use ... and not just a lone shoe.*

Lifting up the common good ... loving outside the box: *Let love be genuine ... hold fast to what is good ... rejoice in hope ... persevere in prayer ...*

VI.

As Paul goes on, we have *echoes* of the **Sermon on the Mount**—although that would hardly seem possible ... as the **Sermon on the Mount** (from Matthew 5-7) was written a full generation after Romans.

The **Sermon on the Mount** is the best of Jesus. It's the high water mark of his teachings. It IS the *high ground* we aspire to as Christians. If we could live out the message Jesus spoke to the multitudes that day on the hillside, we could indeed transform the world.

There would be no war or oppression of the weak and the vulnerable; there would be no greed or self-centeredness that—again and again—brings us down.

CHECK IT OUT: *Turn the other cheek ... love your enemies ... don't judge one another ... don't worry about your possessions or how much you have; in all things, forgiveness and mercy; and, of course, do to others as you would have them do to you.*

But note Paul's language here (Romans 12, from our reading this morning):

***Bless those who persecute you ... bless and do NOT curse them ... do NOT repay evil for evil ... but do what is noble in the sight of all ... Don't revenge yourself ... overcome evil with good*** (the same *high ground* exhortations and teachings).

Paul's PEP TALK in Romans spells it out for us. And it's only deepened and stretched all the more by our reading from Matthew on the *suffering love of Christ*.

Jesus, here, in the scripture I shared earlier, is trying to talk to his disciples about his future suffering and death and what it all means ... and understandably, it just sails right over them ... and they won't fully grasp it all until after the Easter experience.

He says to them: ***If you want to become my followers, you have to deny yourselves and take up your cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it; and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.***

Tough challenge because we've got to give up stuff.

## VII.

Each of our scriptures this morning unveils core teachings of the Christian life. They lift up love and hope and the common good. And they challenge us, as followers of Christ, to get beyond ourselves and see the BIG PICTURE of our lives.

Friends, it's the second half. During the second half—always—there's a sense of urgency. There's only so much time; so much time to live our lives towards the *high ground* and to BE the Christians God calls us to become in Christ.

***Don't repay evil for evil ... hold fast to what is good ... Bless those who persecute you ... let love be genuine ... Rejoice in hope ... be patient in suffering ... persevere in prayer ... live peaceably with all.***

**All praise be unto God! Amen!**

Dr. Jeffrey E. Frantz  
Miami Lakes Congregational Church, *United Church of Christ*  
6701 Miami Lakeway South  
Miami Lakes, FL 33014  
On the web at [www.mlcchurch.com](http://www.mlcchurch.com)

