

This is the second week of Hope Month here at Grace, the month each year when the entire church... adults, youth and children all focus together on one of the world's six broken places. And as Barry told us last week, this year's Hope Month series, which we are calling 'Never Alone,' is focused on the broken place of isolation, a broken place that has become particularly relevant during the past few months. Last week Barry began our series by giving us some stark statistics related to the damage isolation brings into people's lives... damage that touches every aspect of our being: body, mind and soul. Now, some of you *may* recall that I've spoken about this broken place a couple of times in the past... even as recently as this past March and each time I've talked about people feeling alone and isolated I have received a virtual tsunami of responses from those who are either personally feeling isolated or from people who have friends or family members who are living in circumstances of deep loneliness. And now, sadly, 6 months into this pandemic, almost everyone that I talk to has felt *some* sense of being separated from others in this new world of social distancing and mask wearing. I'm sure it's obvious why we chose to focus on the broken place of isolation during this year's Hope Month. Isolation is everywhere! But, as Barry said last week, we are convinced that the circumstances we find ourselves in today due to Covid 19 don't give us license to continue to drift further and further apart. No, our hope is that during this year's Hope Month we will all be drawn closer together as we focus on bringing healing to those around us who are suffering from isolation. Our ultimate intension this month is to give us all the HOPE, no, the confidence, that the battle against isolation is one we can win! And we don't say this lightly. We strongly believe that through the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit we can see isolation defeated! And our confidence comes from the fact that the church, The Church with a Capital T and the local church, is at its core, about community, about belonging and sharing our lives and caring for one another. I will say it again, we believe there is hope that we can win the battle against isolation, and this hope comes right out of God's word! And one of the places that God's word tells us straight up that isolation can be defeated is found in the letter that Paul the Apostle wrote to the Christians in Rome, a letter we now call the Book of Romans. And today we're going to look at a small section of this letter in the anticipation of finding hope! So, let's all turn in our Bibles to the 12<sup>th</sup> Chapter of the Book of Romans (page ) and see what God has to say to us today about finding victory over the scourge of isolation. But before we do, I want to pray.

As you are turning to Romans 12, I want to give you some background to this letter. As I said earlier, this letter was written by the Apostle Paul to the Christians living in Rome. But Paul had never been to Rome; he didn't know these Romans Christians and they didn't know him. He was, though, planning to travel through Rome soon on his way to Spain... he'd heard through the grapevine that there were serious issues between the Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians in Rome and Paul wanted to address these issues before he came to Rome, but he knew he needed do it in a way that showed the Roman Christians that he was someone they needed to take seriously. So, he sent them this letter and boy, does this letter ooze with authority! The first 11 chapters are all deeply theological and they brilliantly address the divisions that were boiling over between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians in Rome... and while these first 11 chapters can be heavy reading, they prove that the respect and authority that Paul had in many of the early churches, and was Paul was hoping to have in Rome,

was well-deserved. Then right at the beginning of chapter 12, where we are starting today, we read these words: ‘And So’ or at least that is what we find in the NLT. ‘And so.’ And ‘And so’ is fine. Other translations say things like, ‘Therefore’ or ‘Because of this!’ The Greek word here is *oun* ... and *oun* is a connecting word that meant something like this: ‘In view of all that I have said previously, this is what you should now do.’ Or ‘Now that I have successfully made my case, listen carefully to my advice for moving forward.’ This one little word, *oun*, shifts the entire focus of Paul’s letter from deep, theological reflection to practical advice about how Christians, especially Christians who are at odds with one another, should live. One-word changes everything. And so, here is what we read in verse one of chapter 12. (What I am going to do is read these 13 verses and comment as we go along).

*And so, dear brothers and sister, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him.* What Paul says here is something that no one had ever said before. No one, to my knowledge, had ever talked about sacrifices being ‘living!’ Sacrifices were common in the ancient world... they were gifts to the gods and, in the end, all sacrifices that involved ‘bodies’ of any kind meant *ending* a life. Now, I know that any talk about sacrifice is weird to us... but Paul is actually saying something that isn’t weird at all and it’s this: when we live our lives showing that everything about us has been given over completely to God... when all that we do and say is a sign of how thankful we are for what God has done for us, then our life becomes worship that pleases God. Now, these verses are literally seeped in complicated ‘sacrifice talk’ but, for right now all we need to hold on to is this: how we live each moment of every day is important to God and, I will say it again, when we live our lives showing that everything about us has been given over completely to God... when all that we do and say is a sign of how thankful we are for what God has done for us, then our life becomes worship that pleases God... this kind of life can be called a living sacrifice! And what Paul says next grows right out of this call for us to live a ‘living sacrifice’ life. Paul says, *‘Don’t copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God’s will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.* The question would be, ‘Changing the way we think about what behaviors and customs of this world?’ Well, Paul sets out to answer that very question in verse three. Paul first reminds the Romans of who he is... he says, *<sup>3</sup> Because of the privilege and authority God has given me, I give each of you this warning...* Then he says, *‘Don’t think you are better than you really are. Be honest in your evaluation of yourselves, measuring yourselves by the faith God has given us.’* The first thing Paul says needs to change is how we think about our own importance... The behavior and the customs of the secular 1<sup>st</sup>-Century world were all about bragging; haughtily expressing an ‘overblown estimate of your self-worth’ was considered virtuous! And this haughtiness was slipping into the world of the Roman Christians; the Roman Christians were bragging about having been born a Jew or a Gentile. And Paul says measure yourself by the faith that God has given us all... and the faith that God has given us all is a faith that is built on the fact that Jesus died for everyone. You can’t learn God’s will until you set aside any thought that you are better than anyone else and admit that there is no difference between any of us! And then Paul goes on in verse 4 to paint a picture of how things are supposed to be: *Just as our*

*bodies have many parts and each part has a special function, so it is with Christ's body. We are many parts of one body, and we all belong to each other. In his grace, God has given us different gifts for doing certain things well. So, if God has given you the ability to prophesy, speak out with as much faith as God has given you. If your gift is serving others, serve them well. If you are a teacher, teach well. If your gift is to encourage others, be encouraging. If it is giving, give generously. If God has given you leadership ability, take the responsibility seriously. And if you have a gift for showing kindness to others, do it gladly.* This image of the parts of the body all working together to make things function well wasn't invented by Paul; ancient Philosophers used this image to talk about how society should work, and historians used this image to talk about the workings of the military. Paul was now using this well-known image to speak specifically about the way the Christian community **should** work. His point was this: we all want every part of our own bodies to function at their best. And so, does God! He wants all the parts of his body, the church, no matter what role each part plays, to be functioning at their best. Now, you'd think this would have been self-evident, but Paul must have known from what he'd heard about things in the Roman church, that he needed to remind them that we are all in this together. Then he says this in verse 9. <sup>9</sup> *Don't just pretend to love others. Really love them.* The word that Paul uses here to say, 'Don't pretend' is *anupokritos*. (an-hu-pok-ri-tos). Could you hear the word hypocrite in that Greek word? *anupokritos* literally means is, 'Don't be an actor.' *upokritos*, (a 'hypocrite') is the Greek word for an actor, someone who pretends to be someone else. Paul was saying that the essence of hypocrisy, the essence of pretending to be someone other than who you really are, especially in the church, is acting like you love someone when you don't care about them at all. And goodness, we can all relate to that kind of 'acting.' The word Paul uses here for love is *agape*, which is the highest form of love that exists; it is a love that does what is best for someone else while never expecting anything in return. And Paul says that Christians are to love one another with the highest form of love. Then he adds, *'Hate what is wrong'* and what could be more wrong than just pretending to love others... Then he writes, *'Hold tightly to what is good.'* And he tells us what is good. He says, *'Love each other with genuine affection and take delight in honoring each other.'* In the verse just before this one, Paul used the word *agape* to talk about the love that we should have for one another. But here in this verse Paul uses a different word for love: *filos*. It is the word for love between family members. We know this word: Philadelphia: the city of brotherly love. It is a word that means siblings-in-a-family love. Paul was saying that even though you Romans are from different ethnic backgrounds and your cultural practices and ways of looking at the world may be very different you are to love each other as family. And Paul had good reasons for saying this, not the least of which was that many Christians, both Jewish and Gentile, were disowned by their blood-families when they chose to follow Jesus. Paul's point here is this: When people follow Jesus they become members of a new family... God's family... and God intended for **his** family to find joy in bringing honor to one another, and to want the best for one another and to stand with one another in good and bad times. Then Paul goes on to name a few ways to make certain that these family relationships work best: <sup>11</sup> *Never be lazy, but work hard and serve the Lord enthusiastically,* <sup>12</sup> *Rejoice in our confident hope. Be patient in trouble and keep on praying.* All good stuff. But then he says this and now we get to the core of healing the broken place of isolation.

*13 When God's people are in need, be ready to help them. Always be eager to practice hospitality.* Paul has now connected people being in need with practicing hospitality. The first thing I need to do is tell you what the word hospitality (filozenia in the Greek) (filoksenia) meant to the people that Paul was writing to. Or maybe I should tell you what it didn't mean. We often think of hospitality as being a good host or hostess... people who love to invite others over to share a good meal in a beautiful setting. Now I am not saying that there is anything wrong with this at all, not at all... this IS hospitality in our world, but the word filozenia didn't have much to do with modern day hospitality. filozenia meant being willing to open your home and your life to travelers who were absolute strangers... people who were in great need of safety and a place to stay as they traveled through a strange city or town. The ancient world was not a place of hotels and inns. The few inns that existed were often categorized by the number of cockroaches one might encounter while sleeping there. And strange, distant places were dangerous places. Travelers were as isolated and alone in the world as people could be. 1<sup>st</sup> Century Christian hospitality was keeping an eye out for these kinds of travelers and opening your home and your family's life to them. It was saying, 'Come and find safety with us.' Hospitality was the love of strangers no matter where they might have come from or what their reason for being so far from home might have been. Last week Barry said that the path out of isolation begins with dignity. This is absolutely true of filozenia. It is seeing the dignity of every needy, lonely person who crosses your path and taking the risk of reaching out to bring them into the family. Paul says, 'Be eager to practice this kind of hospitality!'

So, let's put Romans 12:1-13 all together. First, we are to give all of our lives as sacrifices to God... second, we are to have sane estimates of how important we really are... third, we are to help the body of Christ function as well as it can, fourth, we are to truly love one another like family. And finally, we are to proactively be looking for ways to help others in need, particularly when that need is relief from isolation... from being alone in the world. Paul's call here is for the church to step up... and Barry said it last week, we are going to call on Grace church to step up throughout this series. I don't think the message here is spiritual brain surgery: people are in need... they are isolated and alone and we are called to proactively give others dignity, love them honestly and openly move into the places of loneliness... even if it inconveniences us, even if it feels difficult and uncomfortable... we are to show the lonely hospitality, we are to live filoksenia in ways that overcomes and heals the brokenness of isolation. For 1<sup>st</sup> Century Christians it meant when you see travelers in the street who look lost or uncertain, you invite them into your home. For us it means proactively looking for ways to move into the lives of those that we know are isolated and alone... the elderly in care facilities or simply alone in their homes... young mothers who feel trapped at home having to both work and educate their children... teenagers who have been separated from their friends and the activities that filled their days for months now... people with compromised immune systems due to chemotherapy or diabetes or heart conditions who are constantly worried that they will catch the virus somewhere... single people who are terribly isolated, working from home and unsure that anyplace is safe... I could go on and on listing people in lonely and isolated circumstances... but what is most important is that Paul's letter tells us straight up that the church's responsibility, our

responsibility to proactively look for these people and make them family members... offer them filozenia... hospitality!

I learned about this at an early age. I went to North Central HS. For decades North Central has had a thing called Jr. Spec. It may still be a thing... It is a production/contest where a number of creative HS juniors each write a their own one-act musical and then they invite 50 or so of their friends to sing and dance in their musical... then there is a night when the best 4 or 5 of these one-act musicals are performed and they are judged and there are winners for various categories. It's was a big thing. It may still be. Well, when I was a Junior, I didn't get asked to be a cast member by anyone... I honestly didn't know anyone else that didn't, but I was in the pit band that played the music for all this singing and the dancing... so I had to be at all the rehearsals and the performances. Well, after it was all over, everyone went to their various cast party and, once again, I didn't get invited to any of those either. I remember walking the mile home in the dark alone that night, thinking something like this, 'Well, that proves it. I am completely invisible. I am on my own.' When I got home my mom heard me coming in and called out to me, 'Hey, Arnie Book called earlier and said to tell you he'd been thinking about you and wondered if you wanted to get together. He said if you got home too late, he'd see you tomorrow at church and maybe you two could hang out tomorrow afternoon.' Arnie Book was the 22-year-old youth leader at our church. Why he called that evening I don't know, but he called, and that call let me know that I wasn't invisible. Arnie had made a habit out of reaching out to the lonely looking kids... the ones that needed some place of safety... and I was one of those kids. Arnie was someone who had given his life to representing Jesus and he'd responded to the Holy Spirit's leading and he called me and what that call told me was that I wasn't alone. Arnie would probably say he didn't do anything special. But it was special to me then and that call it still resonates with me. It was exactly what I needed in that moment to let me know that there was hope that the isolation that I felt could be overwhelmed in the name of Jesus... and that feeling of having someone reach out and touch me in a moment when I felt all alone has never left me.

I know that reaching out to others right now goes against what we are being told we should be doing... we are not supposed to be risking our safety or our comfort to nurture others right now... but **now** is our time, Grace Church. **Now** is our time to be a place that *heals* isolation... and it begins by living filoksonia... a phone call... a letter... a driveway bowl of ice cream can go a long way to getting iloksonia started. Is hospitality hard work? Yes, it is. This kind of hospitality forces us to take risks and to change the way we think about who is need and who is in our family. But I am confident that doing the hard work that it will take to make certain that 'never alone' is a reality here in our community is God's good and pleasing and perfect will for this church in this moment. I'll let Paul say it one more time. *When God's people are in need, be ready to help them. Always be eager to practice hospitality.*

