

“Showing Up”
Romans 12:1-2, 14-18
14th Sunday after Pentecost

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Westminster, Greenville
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We are continuing our sermon series on the Apostle Paul this morning, and according to Paul, one of the most important parts of being God’s Church is something that each of you have already done today.

You know what that something is?
Showing up.

Your attendance here.
Your presence here.
Your engagement in the life of this church.

According to Paul, there is no substitute for showing up.
As he said to the church in Thessalonica, in our first text for today:

“...we longed with great eagerness to see you face to face. For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, wanted to again and again—”

But Paul couldn’t do it.

So he sent Timothy to be with them.
To encourage and strengthen them.
And when Timothy returned to Paul, Timothy had good news:

“He has told us also that you always remember us kindly and long to see us—just as we long to see you.”

What’s Paul talking about?
It’s the power of showing up.
Do you know anything about the power of showing up?

When our youngest son was diagnosed with leukemia at 17 months, we did NOT need a whole bunch of friends and loved ones showing up in his hospital room.

So the church that we were a part of at that time sent cards, it was their way of being there for us, and I'll never forget that stack of cards that we came home to...

But someone unexpected did arrive in our son's room that first weekend in the hospital. It was his primary care doctor, his pediatrician. There was no medical reason for him to be there, he would no longer be the doctor treating our son, but he had heard about the diagnosis and wanted to stop by to see how we were doing.

I'll never forget it.

He didn't have to be there, but he was there.

And 14 years later, I still remember it.

For the rest of my life, I suspect I'll remember it.

He made a point of going out of his way...to show up.

Has anyone ever done something like that for you?

Do you know the power of showing up?

Showing up, of course, isn't just important in times of difficulty. It's also important in our day-to-day.

At last Sunday's Session meeting, the Session did what it does at the beginning of every fall—it approved our Sunday School teachers, and our It's Elementary volunteers, and our youth advisors for the upcoming school year.

How many names do you think were approved?
98.

98 members of this church said that when it's Sunday morning at 10a, they're not going to be lounging on their couch. When it's Sunday evening at 5p, they're not going to be sitting on their patio. When it's Wednesday afternoon, they're not going to be running errands.

They're going to be here.

Giving their time, sharing their love, using their faith to help shape the faith of the teenagers and children of our church.

Because there is no faith formation for any of us without someone else passing the faith down to us.

Being a model for us.

Without someone saying YES.

Count on me.

I'll show up.

Of course, Paul's concern was not just whether he could be present for his churches, make a visit to his churches, when and whether he could show up.

When Paul wrote his letters, he was also very focused on how God would show up.

The two letters we have before us today, 1st Thessalonians and Romans, provide a terrific example of a change in Paul's theology. 1st Thessalonians is the earliest of Paul's letters, and Romans is the latest.

So when Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, it was early in his missionary life.

And he believed that Jesus would come back in his lifetime.

To the Thessalonians, Paul writes:

“For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? Yes, you are our glory and joy!”

Paul believed Jesus was about to show up!

But by the time Paul wrote Romans, things had changed.

Years had gone by.

And Paul began to realize that maybe he was mistaken—maybe Jesus would NOT return in his lifetime—maybe God’s church would have to wait and wait and wait...

And Paul’s concern for the church in Rome is that in their waiting, their faith might waver, and they might get distracted, and they might be shaped not by the gospel, but by the powers and cultural currents of their day.

So he writes to them:

“I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds...”

Paul is worried that the Roman church will lose its focus.

That they’ll stop paying attention to what’s important.

That they’ll stop showing up.

Hmmm...that doesn’t sound like a concern JUST for churches in Paul’s day. It’s also an issue for churches in our day.

Last year, a book was published by the professor Sheila Liming, the title of which was:

Hanging Out: The Radical Power of Killing Time.

In her book, Dr. Liming explores what she calls the “quiet catastrophe” that’s growing in this country: how fewer and fewer of us simply spend time “hanging out” with people outside of our immediate family.

Unscheduled time. Unplanned time.

When she was doing research for the book, she says:

“I stumbled upon [this Internet site] where people talk and post photos of these houses that they found...that are amazing looking. And...there’s no neighbors within like 40 miles [of these houses].

“I was really, really interested in that...what is that impulse...that...dream...to achieve some sort of isolation where you would not have to interact with or even see other people if you didn’t want to.”¹

Dr. Liming isn’t the first to write about this problem of the growing isolation in our country. Robert Putnam addressed something similar, almost 25 years ago, in his magnificent book, *Bowling Alone*.

But even before that, there was the bestselling book from the mid-1980s, *Habits of the Heart*...

In that seminal work, the late sociologist Robert Bellah explored the question: “How ought we to live...as Americans?”

¹ From Ezra Klein’s podcast with Sheila Liming, found at [Transcript: Ezra Klein Interviews Sheila Liming - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](#).

Collaborating with other researchers, Bellah and his colleagues came across a young woman named Sheila Larson.

“Sheila Larson,” writes Bellah, “is a young nurse who...describes her faith as ‘Sheilaism.’

‘I believe in God. I’m not a religious fanatic.
I can’t remember the last time I went to church.
My faith has carried me a long way. It’s Sheilaism.
Just my own little voice.’”

Just my own little voice?

As Bellah goes on to point out, “This suggests the logical possibility of over 220 million American religions, one for each of us.”²

Of course, this line of thinking would have driven the Apostle Paul **ABSOLUTELY NUTS!**

The point of following Jesus, according to Paul, is not isolation, not separation, not our own little voice.

It’s listening to all voices.

It’s putting ourselves in the same room, at the same table, with people who aren’t like us.

As he put it in his letter to the Galatians:

² *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, by Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven Tipton, Berkley: University of California Press, 1985.

“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

Paul believed that Jesus came to break down the walls that divide us. Not through personal salvation, but being saved together. Not by eating our bread alone, but breaking bread together.

It’s why Paul tells the church in Rome:

“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...”

In Paul’s theology, God’s church is created to be a living example of—

as the scholar N.T. Wright puts it:
 a “new way of being human.”³

Which is why showing up is so important.

Like I said at the beginning, y’all showed up today.
 You’re doing what Paul asked.
 I may be preaching to the choir in this sermon.

And not just today.
 We had a wonderful day of service yesterday.
 Terrific group here at Westminster, working for Thornwell.
 A splendid group doing yardwork for Soteria houses.
 And this weekend, over a hundred youth and something like 20 adult chaperones at Look Up Lodge, to kick off the year.

³ N.T. Wright, *Paul: A Biography*, New York: HarperCollins, 2018.

But with all the demands on our time, there's still a temptation for any one of us to let our attention wander. I mean, what are we—14, 15 minutes into the sermon...how many of you, during the course of this sermon, found your mind wandering just a bit?

No need to raise your hand.

I get it.

It's easy to lose our focus.

And one of the ways we can lose our focus at a church our size, is by saying seven little words.

You know what those words are?

SOMEONE ELSE IS GOING TO DO IT.

Someone else will join a WestConnect group.

Someone else will serve as an usher.

Someone else will increase their pledge.

Someone else will coach basketball.

Someone else is going to do it.

The implication is that Westminster doesn't need you.

But you know what?

It's not true.

What's true is that there is no Westminster without the grace of the living God—working through you.

The retired professor of preaching, Tom Long, tells about a church he once belonged to in his retirement.

It was a small church.
Only 20 or so attended worship each Sunday.

There was no education program.
No committees.
Not even a choir.

But it was a church committed to hospitality, and they were more than happy when strangers showed up. In fact, the church had a long-standing and cherished practice of leaving the building open all the time for anyone who wanted to come in and pray.

So when the church's insurance company cracked down and insisted that the church building be locked during the week, the congregation knew that they had no choice but to comply.

But they also decided to do something else.
They installed a padlock on the door.
And then they put the key under a rock beside the door.
And then they painted the word KEY on the rock!

Every summer, on a Saturday in August, this church would hold its annual Peach Festival. The women of the congregation would stay up all night on Friday baking scrumptious peach pies and pound cakes. The men would set up folding chairs and wooden tables and churn gallons of fresh peach ice cream.

Local artisans would set up dozens of booths.
People would come in large numbers from all over the county to the festival.

It was a day during the year that everyone looked forward to.

Tom Long writes:

“One year, I was behind the counter dishing up peach ice cream in what we euphemistically called our ‘fellowship hall,’ [which was] actually a rough cinderblock building set apart about a hundred feet from the wooden frame sanctuary.

Between the church and the fellowship hall was the church cemetery, and wooden picnic tables had been placed on the green spaces between the graves.

At one point, Tom’s pastor came over to him and said, ‘Come, look.’

Sitting at the wooden tables set among the tombs and shaded by live oak trees, there were a couple dozen folks quietly eating peach ice cream. They were rich, poor, and very poor; Black, Asian, Hispanic, and white; young and old; oystermen in bib overalls and women in faded-flower print dresses...and children, the stain of ice-cream around their mouths, were playing hide-and-seek among the gravestones; the living and the dead.

‘Do you see what I see?’ asked his pastor.

‘Yes,’ Tom replied, ‘I think I do.’

“What she saw and what I saw was a glimpse of the beloved community, the peaceable kingdom of God breaking through and making itself known.

“There was no holy glow over the scene...

It was a “fleeting glimpse, the kingdom showing itself for a transitory moment, revealing the hope of a greater feast of glory to come.”⁴

⁴ Thomas G. Long, *Proclaiming the Parables: Preaching and Teaching the Kingdom of God*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2024.

It was a gift of God, a gift he never would have received if he hadn't volunteered to scoop ice cream for his church that night.

If he hadn't decided...to show up.

One final thought—it's going to sound like a non-sequitur, but stay with me.

How many of you remember me mentioning our dog in a sermon or two before?

How many of you remember me asking if anyone wants a dog?

I mean, she hasn't changed her behavior.

She still barks at random strangers.

She still pulls at the leash.

She still tries to get food off our kitchen counter at home.

She's still the same dog she was the last time I mentioned her in a sermon.

We had a friend from out of town visit this past spring, and this friend, years ago, once described dogs as the original Christians. Very loving, very forgiving. I knew what she meant.

But in my mind, Pepper—that's our dog's name—Pepper...as the original Christian?

I mean, she still has a long way to go.

Except, perhaps, for one thing.

- When I was on the couch recovering from hip surgery, I noticed something...there she was, laying on the floor right next to me.
- When I come home from work these days, there she is...waiting at the front door for me.

Along with all her awful instincts, she has this one instinct.
To show up.

Dogs...as the original Christians?

I don't know...maybe our friend was on to something...

(Amen.)