

Keep On

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After you read through the gospels, and the book of Acts, most of the New Testament is comprised of letters.

If you think about it, it is a somewhat unusual genre for scripture. We often think of the bible as the booming voice of God, commandments handed down on tablets, sweeping prophesy, and big, bold, universal statements of truth, and wide-reaching moral demands.

Yet, of the 27 books in the New Testament, 21 of them are letters. Somewhere along the line, churchy folks wanted to make that sound a little more mysterious, so they stuck with the ancient Greek word, epistle. But, that just means letters.

21 of the 27 books are letters. And, just as interesting, none of them of written to us.

So in fact a large portion of the New Testament is actually a form of eavesdropping. We are listening on a letter, sent from one early christian to another, or to a community of others. Most of what we know about the earliest origins of our faith, we know in a sense by opening someone else's mail.

Now these letters contain beautiful and inspired words.

“Love is patient, love is kind...”

“Whoever sows sparingly will reap sparingly...”

“We walk by faith, not by sight...”

“Nothing, not even death, can separate us from the love of God...”

Beautiful, inspired, words. The kind of things we are not surprised to find in the Bible. Wisdom and moral direction, timeless teaching.

And then... we get this morning's reading from Philippians. Which comes from the very end of the letter, gets very particular.

After all, this is a letter, from Paul, to a group of Christians in a city called Philippi.

And so he signs off his letter with some words of greeting and thanks.

Please tell Euodia and Syntyche to work out their dispute.

And please give Clement my best.

It is easy to skip over these little perfunctory sign-offs in Paul's letters. After all, he isn't talking to us.

In fact, we have no idea who Euodia is, or Syntyche, other than that they are, Paul says, "loyal women who have worked beside me in proclaiming the gospel."

And we don't really know what they were arguing about, only that Paul urges them to "be of one mind."

But I love these little moments. Because it is easy to forget that history is made of moments like this.

It is tempting to imagine history as just a set of neatly arranged stepping stones, heroes, villains, significant events, and time moving from one, to the next, to the next.

But that is not how we got here. We got here because of the everyday lives of people whose names we will never know.

It is tempting to believe that the great heroes of our faith were not only in the business of grand and sweeping theological discourses.

But they were just as attentive to the practical matter of how we build community together.

And it may also be tempting to believe that our lives have only been significant if our deeds are memorable.

But that is just not true. God's beloved community, and indeed God's just world, is built by the everyday ways we knit our lives together and weave goodness into the world.

The world changes more by the aggregate of ordinary human kindness than it does on the actions of any one great historical figure.

And the fabric of our world is torn more harshly by the aggregate of banal human cruelty than it is by any one despot or oligarch.

It is true that leaders can act responsibly to inspire our better natures, or irresponsibly to unleash our worst, but in the end our society is not created by how it is spoken about or imagined by a powerful few.

It is created by how we treat one another everyday. By what we invest ourselves in. By who we give ourselves to. By what we cherish. By what we sacrifice.

And I think this is why even someone as important as Paul, takes time in so many of his letters to tend to the mundane tensions and quarrels of life in his churches.

And, for that matter, I believe that the value of having these letters as part of our sacred scripture is not only in the big truths they proclaim, but in the way they remind us of the holy work of maintaining and mending relationships in community.

Yesterday, a group of us from the church took a trip to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. We spent a fun few hours exploring our faith through works of art across history.

And then at the end, we made a pilgrimage to a small out of the way basement room, Gallery LG36. Where, among a pretty good

collection of art and artifacts from Colonial Puritan New England, is — on loan from this church— the original silver communion cup used by the founders of this church in the 17th century.

I always find myself imagining the hands it passed through, the lips it touched, thousands of people, very few of whose names we know. And yet each one of them was a part of a story that we are all a part of too.

Good and bad.

History was made by the loving community they built with one another in this place. By the space for religious freedom they carved out here a world away from their homeland.

And history was shaped also by their routine cruelty toward the native people who inhabited this land before they arrived.

Both of those legacies echo into our world today.

Our ordinary goodness, and our ordinary sin, both outlive us in ways we could never anticipate.

Now Paul does not just leave us without any direction as his letter comes to a close. He has a piece of advice for his friends in Phillipi, for Euodia, and Syntyche, and Clement, and whatever they are fighting about.

And it is a word for you and for me too.

Keep on.

Keep on doing the thing you have learned, and received, and heard.

Paul says.

Keep on praying. Keep on singing. Keep on marching. Keep on hoping. Keep on demanding. Keep on dreaming.

Keep on showing up with dinner. Keep on checking in to say hello.

Keep on pithing in, and helping out.

Keep on telling the old stories. And keep on making new ones.

It would be so tempting to turn on the TV, or look around our world and think “history isn’t made by people like me.”

But it is. The directions we set for our days and our lives are a part of shaping the world as it is becoming.

And it would be so tempting to think that if I cannot do anything big and earth-shattering today, then why bother trying anything at all.

But is is worth it. A hateful world is only formed by compiled acts of malice.

A just and peaceful world will only be created by myriad acts of love.

That is Paul's message to that church. Work out your argument with each other, then keep on. Keep on to heal the next broken thing. Keep on to touch the next tender heart with a message of love. Keep on to struggle for the sake of God's dream for this world.

And that is scriptures message to this church, to us. Keep on. There is something broken that you can fix. There is something lost that you can find. There is something yet unimagined that you can name. There is someone whose life would be changed by your love.

It can be so tempting to think that if we can't change everything, why change anything. And if we can't change the world all at once, we can't change it at all.

But you can, we can. Just keep on. Keep on.