

Reflection on the Scripture: Romans 12:9-21

[[The video of the reflection.](#)]

Jesus calls us to live in the real world, not the world to come, not the world as we would like it to be with all the knuckle heads taken out of it. Jesus calls us to live in the real, messy, mean, difficult world as it is. And we're supposed to live in the real world his way. He's asking a lot, and he knows he is. *If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me* (Matthew 16:24).

We live in a world of wildfires and hurricanes. We know what to do then. Natural disasters are why God invented casseroles and neighbors who show up with work gloves and Hefty bags. And if the scale is a little beyond a pan of lasagna, we can contribute money to Outreach and they'll get it to the [UCC Disaster Ministries](#) and help will get to Iowa after the derecho there, and to Lebanon to help in the aftermath of the explosion and down to Louisiana and Texas. We can live in that world, we get it, we can *contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers* (Romans 12:13). It's not easy, but we do it.

We live in the world of the upcoming presidential election. We're less sure what to do there. We've seen the polls and we know we're divided. And we know that in the end, someone is going to win and whoever loses is going to feel like their votes and their voices were ignored, dismissed, passed over.

We live in small towns and we know perfectly well who has what lawn sign. And we know perfectly well whose lawn signs doesn't match ours. But we still worship with them, we still stand with them in coffee hour (back when coffee hour was a thing) and ask about their grandkids and how their golf game is coming along. We're one of the last places in America that still knows how to talk and care across that division. It's not always easy, but we have the skills to do it. And we have the skills to show the rest of our communities how to remain in relationship with people who don't agree with us.

We know our history, not only the last 240 years, but the last 7,000. God recruited not from the mighty, but from the wretched of the earth. We were strangers in a strange land, first slaves in Egypt and then nomads in a wilderness. As Christians we became friends with God when we were strangers, helpless and ungodly, trailing along the dusty roads to Jerusalem.¹ So when we're reminded to *live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly;* (Romans 12:16), we get it. We know how to live in that world, because we've been doing it for millennia. It's not easy, but we do it.

¹ Carl E. Braaten, "Romans 12:14-21." *Interpretation* 38, no. 3 (1984): 293-294.

We live in the world of racism, income inequality and destruction of democracy. We know that evil is in the world, as it has always been, and we know that it is a fearsome power, as it has always been. We look at Belarus and Hong Kong, Russia and Syria, Brazil and the Philippines and we look at our own country. We worry that we are on a road that is leading somewhere we don't want to go. But we can't seem to agree on solutions to take another path.

We know what evil wants. Evil wants it all. Evil doesn't want to control one side of the situation. Evil wants to infect everyone, to get everyone retaliating against everyone else. And we know what Christ did. Christ took all the meanness of the world and ran it through the filter of his own body, repaying evil with good, blame with pardon, death with life.² We know all that and we know that we're not supposed to *repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all* (Romans 12:17). We know that. And we know it's really hard to do and we even try with all our strength to do it. And frankly, if we get it right 80% of the time, we should probably feel pretty good about our efforts. Because we picked up our cross and we followed Jesus. Even when the rest of the world called us idiots or worse for our efforts. It's not easy, but we do it.

Jesus calls us to live in the real world. So when natural disaster strikes, and the political divide widens and evil gets going a little faster in our world, we lift our cross on to our shoulder and we go out there. And we *rejoice in hope, are patient in suffering, persevere in prayer* (Romans 12:12). *We love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor* (Romans 12:10). *We bless those who persecute us; bless and do not curse them* (Romans 12:14). We do all that, because we're Christians and living in the real world means lugging our cross around and genuinely loving people who clearly do not deserve it.

Jesus calls us to live in the real world. And in the real world, there comes a time when we're doing the dishes, or arguing with our computer to get it to do something it knows perfectly well how to do, or we're just driving down a road with trees on either side and a hawk circling overhead. And in that real world, when we're not expecting it, the Voice comes. The Voice comes and says we're not smart enough or thin enough or rich enough or tough enough or funny enough or ambitious enough or young enough or white enough. In that moment, the Voice is right and there is nothing we can do to counter it.

We clean up after the hurricane, we bridge the political division, we repay evil with goodness. But the Voice defeats us. And that's real too. That's when you need another Christian to remind you where it all comes from. So think of

² Barbara Brown Taylor, "It's Hard to Hug a Bully: It is easier to repay evil for evil, but then all you've got is evil." *Christianity Today* 43, no. 1 (1999): 74-75.

someone who you could call to remind you of where it all comes from, why we do all this hard, hard work in the first place. [A pause to think of someone.] *I have loved you with an everlasting love* (Jeremiah 31:3). *I have carried you in the hollow of my hand* (Isaiah 49:2). *I am with you always* (Matthew 28:20). All the love we offer the real world, all that love is just flowing through us from the God who has loved us from the beginning and will love us through any ending we might imagine in this all too real world. As skilled as we are in loving the world, and we can always get better, we are also part of this real world. And we all need help remembering at times where the love comes from. It's not easy, but we do it, we can reach out for help.

So answer Jesus' call. Live in the real world, as miserable and messed up as it is. But remember how much a part of that world we all are. We all need help asking for and accepting the love that is ours. Because that's real too. It's not easy, but we can do it, we can reach out for help. Amen.