

Faith Activated

Menno Mennonite Church
August 30, 2026

Purpose: To frame the invitations of the gifting of the spirit as invitations to be active in faith.

Message: Faith is an active endeavor as we are invited into all that God is doing.

Scripture: Romans 12:9-21 (I will read); Matther 16:21-28 (please read)

Synopsis: Faith is a set of ideas around which we orient our lives. There are the statements that all denominations and groups have the say what it is in particular they believe. Yet the invitation of discipleship again and again is a matter of translating those ideas into lived experience. Paul is imploring the Romans readers not just to understand the body of Christ as a metaphor and an idea but also as a set of actions that have real world impacts. This is what it means to pick up your cross and follow Christ.

Romans 12:9-21

⁹ Love should be shown without pretending.
Hate evil, and hold on to what is good.

¹⁰ Love each other like the members of your family.
Be the best at showing honor to each other.

¹¹ Don't hesitate to be enthusiastic—be on fire in the Spirit as you serve the Lord!

¹² Be happy in your hope,
stand your ground when you're in trouble,
and devote yourselves to prayer.

¹³ Contribute to the needs of God's people,
and welcome strangers into your home.

¹⁴ Bless people who harass you—bless and don't curse them.

¹⁵ Be happy with those who are happy,
and cry with those who are crying.

¹⁶ Consider everyone as equal,
and don't think that you're better than anyone else.
Instead associate with people who have no status.
Don't think that you're so smart.

¹⁷ Don't pay back anyone for their evil actions with evil actions,
but show respect for what everyone else believes is good.

¹⁸ If possible, to the best of your ability,
live at peace with all people.

¹⁹ Don't try to get revenge for yourselves,
my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath.

It is written,
Revenge belongs to me; I will pay it back, says the Lord.

²⁰ Instead,
*If your enemy is hungry, feed him;
if he is thirsty, give him a drink.
By doing this, you will pile burning coals of fire upon his head.*

²¹ Don't be defeated by evil, but defeat evil with good.

Among the most difficult things for us as people to learn as we come up in the world is that the world does not function as it ought to. It fundamentally is not the world as we should be, which is of course the world as we understand it in grade school. People should be fundamentally nice and when they are not they should be made to say that they are sorry. Items should be shared and if you are going to have a party you better make sure that everyone gets a cookie. In short, the world should be fair. And good. And righteous.

Of course, we are all right and correct to feel that way. Not only is it the natural way to be, but it would be the far better way to function if we all shared the ball and everyone had a turn. It is the way of the playground that, while far from perfection and harmony, does have a fundamental justice to it. And when it doesn't there is generally someone to run to and tell your story and plead for justice, fairness, or at least a hug and reassurance that everything is going to be alright. That is how we want the world to be, and that is how we want our God's to belong within it—ready with the whistle to call a stop to whatever nonsense that is going on and call a time out to make everyone friends again. That is what we want, but seldom is that the world as we know it to be.

For the most part we find it reasonably easy to love the people who like and love us. We know who are our people and how we generally get along. But it is harder to genuinely love people who don't much like us or are not like us. It is an impossibility to love people who have harmed us or wish to harm us. That is the logic of our experience. That is the logic of our culture. We want room to function on the playground where the pushes and shoves of life can be handled ideally by the divine teacher there to keep the peace or at least have the opportunity to even the score in proper course. We all know and have known the question that haunts so many of us: why do bad things happen to basically good people. It is the problem of the ages with many difficult answers, most of them rich; few of them realistically satisfying. Recently I have come on the suggestion that our world and our culture has added another question: "If God is good, why doesn't God make the evil suffer in the way that the should?" At the end of the day we want our brand of justice to be shown where the good and bad are delivered to their just desserts in less time it takes for our Amazon order to show up at our doorstep. We expect karma to be the brutal and abrupt check it was meant to be, if not by God and the universe, then it might as well come from us. All of which makes this extended vision of the Christian life all that much more challenging to wrap our heads around living, let alone recommending to anyone else.

Reading our way through Romans 12 is a catalog of the things of that we can and should do as Christian community. As we worked with last week, Paul presents these to dos as a charge—the stuff that we are charged to do as a body of Christ. Many worshipping traditions would have this right there in the bulletin alongside the sending song and benediction—the words meant to lay out the plan to step from worship into the world with a plan to be about the stuff of God. Do the works of love and mercy, rejoice, be patient, contribute, be hospitable, bless, live in togetherness: the stuff of doing the Christian life. All in all it is not a bad idea. We can regularly do with a reminder of the agenda of faith, even when it has become routine; perhaps even more so because it can come as routine. The message is clear and active: **present** yourselves as a living sacrifice. **Choose** transformation. **Discern** the will and mind of God. **Exercise** the various gifts for the sake and function of the body that is the kingdom. The ways and means of how to accomplish all of this can be found in the Gospels, the Sermon on the Mount in particular. These are verbs that we can get behind and understand.

But the latter half of this advice is far tougher than the first. *Beloved, do not avenge yourselves but leave room for the wrath of God.* As a turn of phrase it is a curious thing. If we are to leave room for God's wrath, does that mean that so long as we afford the holy some space we can occupy the rest ourselves? What does it mean that we have a wrathful God, and is that consistent with the image of what we know of God? Ultimately, if God is the definition of love and the image of reconciliation, why would vengeance be mentioned at all? Isn't that the opposite of what we have been talking about the whole time here? Is this the justice balancing God that we have talked about?

In fact and to be utterly clear vengeance, even a little is not one the menu. It is part of this ongoing chain of action verbs we are called to as our direct and contingent response to the grace we have received from Jesus Christ. Because of grace we get to do all these things we mentioned and we get to live this life that is set before us as well. Rather than vengeance, we are to feed our enemies and, if our enemies are thirsty, give them something to drink. In doing so we heap burning coals upon their heads. Which I have to admit even as a young person I thought was a rather extravagant form of revenge in lieu of payment. How is that for a punishment? This sounds a whole lot like Jesus and of course it is in spirit of the thing but not as a quote. The quote here is actually drawn from Proverbs chapter 25:21-22 almost precisely. Paul is telling us how to treat our enemies (for enemies there will be no matter the age). We are to feed them, give

them water, and in truly ancient terms enable their repentance. Heaping burning coals is about provision not punishment, especially in the ancient terms that are being referenced here.

Unless I miss my guess, every one of us has taken some time to considering how we might go about surviving. I know I have—spending some idle minutes considering the what ifs at play in a situation where things get tough in one fashion or the other. I scope out the ways I might go about taking on the challenges of one scenario or the other. For me it is more about the hypothetical rehearsal of a what if rather than any substantial fear of what might be. A useful applied thought experiment you might say. Seldom do I think about fire except to say “well, we can start a fire” to accomplish one objective or another. But we also know the survival stories of being trapped. Fire without the aid of matches or the handy lighter or another is a rather daunting notion indeed. We can easily bring an image to mind of someone making the magic of fire in the extreme situation and the excitement of when the spark catches and holds on enough to make the life giving fire.

Now take that image and transport it to the ancient context. Fire was the stuff that let you have a life in every respect of the word. To let your fire die to the point that it could not be huffed back into life was not merely inconvenient but presented a real menace to survival. Being able to beg and borrow a cup of coals can make a big difference in your life. It is the stuff that maintains and sustains community. Now take that knowledge and apply it to the context of reconciliation. What would it mean to receive coals, living fire that would allow you to restart your fire from someone with whom you were having an argument, or that you were routinely mistreating? How might it change things? Where might it take you? How would it get you thinking differently? This is not just a Hebrew thing either. In ancient Egypt, part of how you showed remorse and inviting change was to take a dish or burning coals carried on the head to allow a meal of reconciliation with someone you wronged to be prepared and the breach repaired. Far from being a broad literary flourish coals of fire upon the head was speaking to the impactful practical actionable way to make the problems better. Bringing the fire as satisfying as that can sound at times can also be the path to something far ore profound than what we can ever imagine.

God’s justice, God’s peace, God’s reconciliation are not just notions that are to be implemented in the eventuality of a world somehow changed from what it is to what it will be. Faith, the trusting of God in light of what we have seen and know is to be the illuminating drive

of our world and our life. Rather than entertaining the notion that the best way to deal with a world that does not measure up to how it should be is to deny that there is a problem in the first place (i.e. there is no way that there is anyone we dislike because we are WAY to nice for that) we are given practical actionable advice that is meant to be just that: good advice. Do what you can to live at peace. Seek the way of reconciliation. And when the lines are crossed, then too remember that you are in the hands of God and live into what you are and what you are called to be. Getting even, as utterly tempting as that is cannot be the highest goal. Rather as is the way we get to live into this call of being something new in the context of grace with the challenge, always, in living in a way that is not of this world.

Is this easy? Is this obvious? No it is not. But it is real, activated faith that calls us not just to believe but to do, even when doing is not always easy obvious or readily understood. The playground that we live on may not be as we wish, but we are called, always, into that which God is calling us toward.

Prayer to Do God's Will (Thomas Merton)

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going.

I do not see the road ahead of me

Nor do I really know myself,

And the fact that I think I am following Your will

Does not mean that I am actually doing so.

But I believe that the desire to please You Does in fact please You.

And I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.

And I know that if I do this, You will lead me by the right road

Though I may know nothing about it.

Therefore will I trust You always though,

I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.

I will not fear, for You are ever with me,

And You will never leave me to face my struggles alone. Amen.