

Evergreen Presbyterian Church

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April 6th, 2025

Sermon Title: The Connected Church

Sermon Text: Romans 1:8-13

Rom. 1:8 ¶ First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world.

Rom. 1:9 For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you

Rom. 1:10 always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you.

Rom. 1:11 For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you—

Rom. 1:12 that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine.

Rom. 1:13 I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles.

Main Point: God's people do not save each other – that is the work of Christ alone – but we are meant to minister to each other, and to build each other up in the good news of Christ.

Outline:

1. Christians Are Not Islands (1:8-10a)
2. Christians Need Proximity (1:10b-12)
3. Christians Care About Each Other's Spiritual Health (1:13)

Introduction

So there is this Isaac Asimov book called *The Naked Sun*. And in this book, the main character has to solve a murder on this distant planet where the people have developed a deep revulsion to ever being in the physical presence of other humans. Everything they do is done through screens. It makes the inhabitants of this planet physically ill to even be in the same room as another person because they have such a disgust with other people.

And of course the central question in the whole book is, how does someone get murdered on a planet full of robots that can't harm humans (because of the laws of robotics), and on which human beings are disgusted to be around each other?

When the book was written in the 1950s (almost 70 years ago) the whole idea must have seemed so preposterous. People isolated in their homes? Dealing with each other through holograms? That's madness! But now, doesn't it feel like Asimov is picking on lots of us in 2025? Just a little bit?

I have to wonder: is there any aspect of being human today that is more underrated than personal physical presence?

Think about this: we live in the smartphone age. The iPhone age. The distance age. We don't physically turn up at each other's homes without usually weeks of advanced planning, our kids don't even see each other in person without making carefully scheduled play dates. We don't even call, really. We text. We email. Or if we're decent we at least text *before* we call.

But there are few things that remind us more of our humanity than our bodies. And yet boy is it a fact that we are spending less and less time in physical proximity to other human beings than we ever have before, maybe in all of human history!

And so today as we look at this second part of Paul's introduction to this letter, I want you to notice this ongoing theme here of connection. Paul sees himself as connected to these people, and invested in the good of their souls.

But that is why it's so important that he can actually be with them. Because loving them from a distance just is not enough. So three things Paul's introduction here

reminds us of that I think very much speak into an isolated and lonely age like our own: First, Christians Are Not Islands; second, Christians Need Proximity; and then third, Christians Care About Each Other's Spiritual Health.

I really hope that this passage will motivate all of us not only to draw nearer to each other, but to value each other's presence, and to become more and more of a blessing to each other.

1. Christians Are Not Islands (1:8-10a)

First today, Paul's words remind us that we as Christians are not meant to be islands.

You have probably heard this phrase, "No man is an Island". But I wonder if you know where it came from? It comes from a poem by the Christian poet and minister, John Donne. It's not very long, but I'd like to read it:

*No man is an island,
Entire of itself;
Every man is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.*

*If a clod be washed away by the sea,
Europe is the less,
As well as if a promontory were:
As well as if a manor of thy friend's
Or of thine own were.*

*Any man's death diminishes me,
Because I am involved in mankind.
And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;
It tolls for thee.*

Something in this poem pushes back on our individualism. You're not an island. You don't get to just live life devoted to yourself. If any man's death diminishes

you, then doesn't his thriving also increase you? This is true in society, of course. But this has to be especially true in the church.

We are part of one another if we share in Jesus Christ.

Here Paul is, and he is highlighting the connection of the saints to one another, and reminds us of just how much we are really tied together.

Here Paul is writing, and even though Paul is separated from the Romans by incredible distances, he still isn't completely separated from them, and we see that because Paul is *praying* for them.

God in Christ establishes the vital link that exists between Paul and these Roman believers.

They may be separated by geography, but they all share in the same Jesus. And we see the demonstration of that in Paul's prayer. These first three verses are bathed in prayer. Look again at verse 8. Paul says, "I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you."

There is so much here to consider, but let me just give you a couple of aspects of prayer regarding this passage.

First, Paul Thanks God for their faith. Why would you thank God for something unless he is responsible? Well you wouldn't. And Paul is saying that the faith of these Romans is really the work of God, who deserves thanks for it. And all the more because of how far and wide people know about the Roman Christians. In verse 8 he says that their "faith is proclaimed in all the world." That's an incredible work of God, and he deserves the glory for their faith!

Christian, God deserves the glory *for* your faith, too. It's not just the Romans. We will see this later in Paul's letter, but he absolutely receives the glory for each and every person who trusts in His Son and has peace with God.

Second, Paul is always praying for them. Paul strikes this theme in several of his letters – this idea of praying without ceasing, this idea of being a continuously praying person. We may think of prayer as something that is reserved for a specific time and place, but Paul also lives a *lifestyle* of prayerfulness.

We all need to learn from this approach as well. Why does Paul pray so much for the Romans? I would suggest that it's like what John Donne (Dunn) says: no man is an island. The Romans aren't an island, Paul is not an island, none of the churches he has planted are an island. We are all a piece of the continent that is Jesus Christ, and if one be washed out to sea then Christ's church is the less. So by all means, pray for each other. Pray for the church, because you are a part of it. Pray for endurance, for growth, for perseverance, and for other believers to be built up.

Third, the prayerfulness of Paul reminds us that we are not just connected, but we are *dependent* people in so many ways. We need to be careful not to smuggle our rugged American individualism into how we try to conduct our spiritual lives.

We depend on Christ, not ourselves. We never get to be spiritual rugged individualists, because everything that we are depends upon and hangs upon Jesus Christ. This is why Paul thanks God through Jesus for their faith. Well the same is true of us. We are far more frail and needy than we might like to think. We depend on the strength of Jesus. But we also depend on the ministry of Christ through other people. You see, God's plan as he has decided it, is not that we be ministered to by having the gospel beamed down into our brains. Instead he has decreed to bless us and keep us going every single week, through hearing with our ears and believing what we hear and read with our heart.

This is why the church as a whole is so important. It's why massive sections of the New Testament are devoted to the church, because we're not meant to live the Christian life like that, in isolation, separated, independent, apart from everyone else.

We must resist the individualism of our age.

It tempts us to focus on our selves.

It tempts us to disregard others.

It tempts us to disregard the past

It tempts us to disregard our need for prayer, to disregard our need for preaching, for discipleship, for the ordinary means of grace that God has given to us.

It also tempts us to pride. To believing that the church can't do something for us that God has decided the church will do. The *church* has been given the keys of the kingdom. They haven't been given to individual Christians to decide and determine for themselves.

You see, our dependence on the ministry of the church protects us from pride and self-sufficiency.

But if you embrace the spirit of the age and try to do things solo, you will begin to spiritually starve, because God has decided to use the church, and he has not decided to send anyone off on his own to fend for himself.

Instead of starving, embrace your dependency, Christian. Embrace your need for Jesus. Embrace your need for others. Embrace your need for the church. Don't just embrace your need for others, but embrace their need for you.

We will talk about this more in the third point, but many people, almost as a reflex, think very self-centeredly about church. They think in terms of what they're getting, and people tend not to think in terms of what they're giving.

So they'll say, "Well you know, the sermons just aren't speaking to me," or "Well you know, the music isn't quite to my tastes," or "Well the preaching is fine, but I really wish there were more programs."

We are skilled consumers but don't think of ourselves as ministers in any meaningful sense. We often don't think of how God would use us to bless someone else. We think of what we're getting, not what we're giving.

But Paul wants Christians to think more like this: "They need me there. People will be discouraged if I pull away. I need to go so I can encourage someone." That's the attitude Paul has for himself. He wants to impart a spiritual blessing!

Might this be an encouragement for us to stick around a little longer after church than we might normally? Maybe someone needs us to look in on them, ask how they're doing, see how I can pray for them. You may have an aversion to people, but what if there are people who need *you*?

I know many of us are introverts, and it's easy to let ourselves be defined by that. Some of you may be surprised to hear me say that I'm an introvert. I am. I consider myself a level 10 introvert. Very experienced. I'm good at it. I'm the king of the introverts. I feel greatly recharged by being alone, and I do enjoy my alone time. It's one of the secrets of my own ability to do what I do.

But over time God has given me a greater sense of duty that has hopefully helped me to overcome that attitude. I'm not perfect in this. But do you excuse your disposition, or are you at least seeking by God's grace to see your love and care for others increase, despite your natural tendencies?

Christian, will you stop making excuses not to invest in others? This shouldn't sound harsh since I think I'm preaching to myself here.

I could say more, but I hope you are seeing here that we're not islands, we're connected and we need each other.

2. Christians Need Proximity (1:10b-12)

Second though, Paul also shows Christians that we need one another's proximity.

Starting in the second half of verse 10 he says that he's made it a subject of continuous prayer that he wants to be with them. He longs to see them face to face. He wants that in person connection that's so vital and important for Christian fellowship.

If there is anything we learned from the pandemic, I think it would be that prolonged isolation is devastating. We did also learn that some people enjoyed it in some ways. A lot of people had their norms shifted by that isolation so that where they previously had habits of being around others, the pandemic permanently changed how they relate to others. I think it changed the Overton window of what we believe is and isn't acceptable in terms of isolating. I realize that even now people have a reason for staying home that is health related, and I'm not universally picking on people who aren't here for medical reasons. But even after the pandemic has long been over, people are more withdrawn, more solitary, less likely to spend time with others than ever before. And they now see that as normal when they probably didn't previously.

But the problem is, we're robbing ourselves of blessings. We're also robbing others. There is a mutual theft going on when we withdraw! Think about this. Look at verse 11:

"For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you – that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine."

I mean, really think about this! Whatever this spiritual blessing is that Paul wants to give them, it's *more than what can be contained in this letter*. And I mean, this is the book of Romans we're talking about! And Paul's saying, "This letter is great. But it's not enough. *You* need proximity. *I* need proximity. We need to be around each other, not just launching missives to each other from a distance."

I think this directly speaks to us in our day. Don't you? We so easily settle for the digital, when we really need the analog. There is a place for texting or calling or emailing, but let's admit: It's so easy to call or text or email, but there is just no substitute for giving your full attention and time to someone, giving them eye contact and showing them that no one else gets them for this moment of your life's existence. You are giving yourself and your time and your attention to them, not multitasking. And when you do that you really saying to a Christian brother or sister, "You matter. You matter to God, and you matter to Christ, and you matter to me."

But there is another aspect to this which we *really* need to hear. Paul does not believe that this letter, delivered from long distance, is a substitute for up-close, personal pastoring. And I say this because of a couple things. We have an incredible amount of riches today in the resources that God has given to the church. I can get on the internet, and I can listen to decades worth of sermons by Martyn Lloyd-Jones, John Piper, Eric Alexander, and Sinclair Ferguson and David Strain and numerous other men.

During the pandemic, many Pastors were discouraged because people not only stopped coming to church, but they weren't even listening to their pastors at all when they were home. Instead, they picked their preferred or "favorite" pastors. Many people were like, "I'd rather listen to John MacArthur," or fill in your favorite. And it created this weird consumerist situation where parishioners

started to believe maybe they could pick their pastor, or pick the message that they would hear on Sundays. Except the problem is, that other Pastor who is 500 miles away, or 1000 miles away isn't your pastor, doesn't know *your* name, doesn't know *your* situation, and therefore doesn't *care* about you. He can't.

Paul knows that this letter, written from a great distance, delivered over the low-speed ancient fiber optic line that was the written word, cannot take the place of real, personal, direct pastoring by a man who knows your situation, knows your family, knows your challenges, regularly prays for you, and prepares to preach the word for *you* each week. This letter can't take the place of that, no matter how good it is.

Here is what I'm not saying. I'm not saying not to listen to other preachers. No way. I have a number of preachers I listen to, and there's incredible benefit in it. If you tell me you're listening to someone's sermons, unless they're a total weirdo I'm going to be very excited and want to hear what you learned and how you're growing in Jesus.

But that preacher whose sermons you're listening to still is not your pastor. He is not a substitute for your Pastor or your elders. Just know that Paul uses this language in 1 Cor. 13, where he calls the minister "your elder." These other celebrity pastors are not "your pastor." They aren't accountable to God for your soul, we here at Evergreen are. You are a stranger to them, but not to us. God has given you local elders and ministers who are not perfect, but we do love you, and he's given us to you because physical proximity matters, and being there matters.

For Paul, there just is no substitute for being there, for knowing them, for being face-to-face. There's just no substitute. It's why he yearns so badly to be there. He says, "I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you." If he can't see them, he can't impart the gift. If he can't be there, he can't share that encouragement. Nor can he get that encouragement. (There's a nice reminder that Paul is a mere mortal man like us as well. Even the minister needs to be ministered to!) It's just not the same from a distance.

Christian, will you commit to overcoming any hangups you might have, to making an effort to be in each other's lives, to share meals with other Christians, to remember that being there is a way to somehow impart some spiritual blessing

and to encourage other believers in the faith? Do not underestimate the blessing of seeing someone face to face when you are able. Because Paul doesn't.

3. Christians Care About Each Other's Spiritual Health (1:13)

Third, Paul shows us here that Christians care about each other's spiritual health. Look at what he says in verse 13 again:

“I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles.”

The thing that has been in the heart of Paul is not just being in person with them, which we've already seen, but he wants to see a “harvest among [them].” So he has two groups in mind; two groups that he cares about. He cares about evangelizing the *pagans* in Rome, and he cares about building up the *Christians* in Rome. Both of them matter to him.

Here's one thing that people today need to learn from this: we do need a renewed desire to see other peoples' souls ministered to. What do I mean by that? In a materialistic age like ours, we are masters at focusing on *things*. On having things, on getting things, on fixing up things, on making money so we can get more things, and so on.

The material and physical isn't bad, but it is if it makes us forget the soul.

And I do fear that we do easily forget the soul. We have lost the priority and the art of soul care – both as a culture, and often as a church. We need to have a renewed desire to see *souls* flourish. To see people united to Christ and to see them grow in holiness.

Paul doesn't say, “I want to come help you work the wheat fields so you have more food.” He doesn't want to go to Rome so he can help them become more wealthy. His plan is to see them spiritually grow, to be more and more like Jesus in the case of Christians, and to see people come to Christ for the first time, too, in the case of pagans.

Paul wants to be there so that this harvest can happen, but Paul himself, on his own, cannot make this harvest happen. Instead, he plans to simply help them along. Ultimately all of the Romans need to have the same attitude of Paul. They all need to desire a spiritual harvest.

And this is the point I really hope you all see moving toward: the work of the ministry of the church doesn't just belong to the elders and deacons of the church. It's not like, "Well I'm not a church officer, so this isn't for me." No, the truth is, if you are a Christian, you are supposed to do the work of the ministry of the church. That doesn't mean that everyone administers the sacraments or preaches the word. We shouldn't be so narrow. There is more to ministry than that. But Christians do have a duty to minister.

Look at what Paul says in Ephesians 4:11. I think this helps get at what I'm saying:

"And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith." (Ephesians 4:11)

Christian, God sent Apostles and Prophets and evangelists out into the world to take His word to people who needed it. And he has given pastors and teachers to the church to bless you. But he didn't give them to you so that they could just sort of thunder out a message to go into your ears and then just sit there in your brain until next Sunday when you go through those motions again. The message goes in so that *you* will go out! This is Paul's explicit language. God blesses you to "equip you for the work of ministry." Are you doing that?

The plan is this: God sent his Apostles and prophets to give you the truth. He gives you elders and pastors to teach you, to encourage you, to stir up your hearts along with the Spirit to believe and love these things. But then what? You're meant to do the work of ministry. What is that ministry? "The building up of the body of Christ!"

You do that, Christian.

And think about that. Isn't that what he said in verse 12? That being with one another allows Christians to "be mutually encouraged by each other's faith." It's an encouragement that goes both ways. It encourages the encourager, and it

encourages the encouraged. There is a sharing, a building up happening here. That is the plan. It is the “work of ministry,” as Paul calls it.

The plan is not that the elders and pastors of the church should do everything in the church. A while back, someone here said to me, “I know this person in the church who is having issues. I have hung out with him or her for months now, and I think we’re friends. But should I tell them to come talk to you about their issue?” And of course my answer was that I would talk to this person any time they needed, but that if you are close, if they trust you and love you, and if this person knows you love them, then by all means open up and help them yourself.

Think about this. Paul in 2 Corinthians 1:3 tells us that our Lord is the God “who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.” Do you see the plan? God blesses and helps us, and then eventually we take the same comfort to others that we’ve benefited from. That’s called ministry!

You can minister in ways that I and the other elders can’t. You have connections with people that I don’t.

Can I tell you that there are some challenges and sufferings that I know about but I’ve never experienced before?

I’ve never been widowed. If someone in the church experiences that, I have comfort for them, but not like you if you’ve experienced that yourself.

I have never been fired from a job. I’ve quit plenty of jobs, but I’ve never been fired.

There is nobody who can comfort you more than someone who has experienced that and said, “I’ve stood where you’re standing now.”

I’ve never experienced infidelity.

I’ve never been divorced. I’ve seen it, I’ve witnessed its pain and destruction, but I’ve never stood there or been through it.

I’ve fallen down, but I’ve never so much as broken a bone!

And there are ways that I’ve personally suffered that some of you thankfully have not. We all have different gifts and experiences.

And these are things that do happen to Christians. But you know what? For every kind of suffering there is, there's someone here who's experienced it. And that means that the pastors and elders of the church can do important work, but we can't do and be everything to everyone. And we can't minister to everyone the way everyone else can. This is why the whole church exists.

Do you get the point? Do you see it yet?

I want you to remember this, and put it into action: God is at work in us, and he is the one who is really blessing and caring for the church. The church of Jesus Christ is in the hand of God. The Lord Jesus himself is the great shepherd. Even the elders are only undershepherds, and the members of the church are simply serving as the hands and feet of Jesus.

Will you be used by him to show Jesus to those who already know him, and to share the gospel with those who don't yet?

Let's pray.