

## *Individualism and Communitarianism in Nation and Church*

Romans 12

Steve Hollaway  
Harbor Church  
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This week most of us watched the inauguration festivities and heard the President give his address. He said, as many before him have, that “We must do these things *together*, as one nation, and one people.” He spoke of “the commitments we make to each other” which “do not sap our initiative” but strengthen us. He quoted Dr. King, who said that “our individual freedom is inextricably bound to the freedom of every soul on earth.”

Those who listened to the speech from a position of Ayn Rand individualism and libertarianism probably heard every reference to togetherness and commitment as evidence of European-style socialism. But what most people heard, I think, was an effort to balance the concern for individual freedoms with a concern for the well being of the community, what Jim Wallis when he was here called “the common good.” I am not endorsing any particular policies this morning. I just want to suggest that in the New Testament we find a good deal more emphasis on the need to share and to give to one another for the common good than we do on the need for individuals to be free. And on this day of our annual church meeting, we hear the letter to the Romans urging us not to approach the work of the church from the perspective of our own freedoms, our own preferences or wishes, but valuing rather what will make for peace and build up the whole body.

You can see these as two extremes on a spectrum: radical individualism on one end and communitarianism on the other hand. One values the self above all, and the other values the group or the society. Traditionally America has thought of itself as valuing individuals who make bold decisions, while a country like Japan is famous for valuing the group and deciding by consensus. The group of people over the last couple of decades who call themselves communitarians would say that they are trying to maintain a balance between the two. This tension is as evident in the way people think about church as in the way they think about the nation.

It’s not really about left and right, liberal and conservative. It’s almost another axis altogether. David Brooks, the Republican columnist for the *New York Times*, is a good example. He calls himself conservative but also communitarian. The reason is that he sees human beings as socially embedded, as relational creatures, who are shaped by their society and who benefit from a network of connections and traditions. This is a view that has been called conservative for the last 250 years or so. In his 2011 book, *The Social Animal*, Brooks says that both the 60’s revolution and the 80’s revolution were misguided. The 60’s tried to set us free from restraint and from social bonds and rules; the 80’s tried to set the market free from restraint and to free us economically from any responsibility to one another. Both revolutions succeeded in breaking down our social bonds and giving social approval to the kind of person who may show up on Block Island in the summer—the ruthless stock trader who resents all regulation while enjoying pot, sex, and rock and roll.

We say that people came to America for freedom. But most of them did not come alone, to exercise the freedom of expression any way they chose. Most of them came in communities, to be a part of a community in a new place where the community could live by its own values.

John Winthrop's "City Set on a Hill" sermon, preached to the Separatists we call the Pilgrims while they were still at sea, sounds like a communitarian manifesto. Listen:

Now the only way to avoid this shipwreck, and to provide for our posterity, is to follow the counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God. For this end, we must be knit together, in this work, as one man. We must entertain each other in brotherly affection. We must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others' necessities. We must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience and liberality. We must delight in each other; make others' conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, as members of the same body. So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.

Winthrop is a communitarian because he is trying to live by New Testament values. You hear him echoing the Apostle Paul in that sermon. The Separatists may have gotten the balance wrong, with not enough emphasis on the individual, as Roger Williams and the Baptists thought. But you can't argue that this country was founded on the basis of a radical individualism.

The Christian view which you see in Paul's letters emphasizes both the responsibility of the individual and the importance of community. Each of us is responsible for our own relationship with God. Paul broke with his own community when he met the Messiah Jesus on the road to Damascus. Each individual is called to faith in Christ and to obedience to the law of love. But at the same time, the call to faith is a call to become part of the body of Christ. Paul could not have envisioned a Christian who was not part of a church. The fact that we are part of a body in no way diminishes our responsibility for our own lives, and the fact that we are responsible for our own lives does not diminish the fact that we are part of a body. I am responsible for choosing to follow Jesus or not, but in addition to that responsibility I have the obligation to love my brothers and sisters. Do we have the freedom to do what we please? Paul says yes, you are free, but what are you going to use your freedom for. In a sense, everything is legal for us now, but everything does not build up the community. Paul keeps saying: just as I am foregoing my rights as an apostle to be your servant, I want you to forego your rights for the sake of your community.

When Paul writes about the church as a *soma*, a body, it's important to know that the word *soma* was already commonly used as a metaphor for the city or the state. The church is a body with Christ as the head, but Ephesus was also understood to be a body; Rome was a body, Corinth was a body. Paul is using this metaphor to talk about our essential unity in spite of our diversity in gifts and functions, but he didn't make up the metaphor.

This might shed some light on the connection between Romans 12 and Romans 13. I love Romans 12 which talks about being transformed, but being a child of the 60's I've always disliked Romans 13 which says that the authorities have been put in place by God. But if you listened to all of Romans 12, you can probably see that it's not a sudden break. It starts with the command to live at peace—as far as it is possible—with everyone. It has to do with understanding that vengeance belongs to God alone, and that we are not to be the enforcers of justice on our neighbors or our government, however evil they are. We are to feed our enemies. Care for them. We do not overcome evil or evil governments by returning evil or violence. We overcome evil with good—as Jesus said, as Gandhi said, as Martin Luther King said.

But I think the broader connection between Romans 12 and 13 is that we are, like it or not, still part of the body which is the Roman Empire. Paul is writing to Romans, after all. We can't act as if we are not part of that body, that *soma*, because we are Christians. In government

and in church, different people have different functions. We as Christians ought to exercise humility toward those who have been given leadership positions. One of the first things Paul says about what it might mean to have a mind that is transformed and renewed by Christ is “don’t think of yourself more highly than you ought.” Some things need to be delegated. Some things need to be decided by others. Just find out what your “thing” is, and do it. Then love, love, love those people who are so different from you.

1 Corinthians 12 is a longer discussion of the same topic: many gifts, but one Spirit; many members but one body. “Just as the [physical] body is one and has many members...so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slave or free” (12:12-13). The fact that we are different from each other in giftedness or ethnicity or economic status does not change the fact that we are part of one body, one community. We can’t say that we don’t need each other, or that we don’t need the body. The church is not a collection of individuals that have been brought together almost randomly by their own free choices. The church is a body that the Spirit is building by bringing into it the people that are needed for the church to function.

1 Corinthians 12:26 is said to be a commonplace expression of community responsibility: “If one member suffers, all suffer with it.” If one part of your body hurts, all of you is in misery—whether the part is a toe or a tongue or a gall bladder. “If one member is honored, all rejoice together.” If your legs are honored for running a race, your head is happy too. If someone likes your face, your heart rejoices too. Paul says that in Romans 12:15 in the form of a command: “Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep.”

In the public sphere, a lot of the conversation around individual responsibility vs. community responsibility has revolved around how—and how much—we help the needy. There are those who think that welfare—or, for that matter, the Mary D Fund and the Deacons’ Fund—undermine individual responsibility. Some argue that while the church may be called to help the needy, government is not. How should we think about this as Christians?

Even in a secular state, Christians can argue that the nation is still a *soma*, a body, which needs as a matter of self-interest to take care of its members who are in distress. Of course a body needs to protect and care for its weakest members rather than amputate them. If we allow our weakest members—and don’t forget that “member” is a metaphor; the word means “body part”—if we allow our weakest members to become infected and fester and die, the whole body will be the worse for it. If we are a body, survival of the fittest in a competition among animals is not a good metaphor for us to use in moral thinking. We need to think of the homeless, the medically underserved, the illiterate and unskilled not as people we have beaten in some kind of race, but as our own fingers and toes that are hurting and infected. To love your neighbor as yourself means to see your neighbor as continuous with your self, as part of the same body.

Biblically I think the main rubric for thinking about the poor is the one we discussed last week: the prophetic call for justice and the fair distribution of goods in the community. If we say that goods should be shared with the poor—as the Bible does—does that take responsibility away from the poor? Of course not. The Law in the Torah commands giving a tithe for the poor; it commands leaving the edges of your field for the poor to glean; it commands forgiveness of all debt and land redistribution every fifty years to keep the playing field level. You never see any worry about the poor becoming comfortable with being on the dole. The Law assumed that each person would feel a sense of responsibility for his/her own well-being and family and not somehow dump that on Moses.

There is one place in the New Testament that talks about moochers. In 2 Thessalonians, it seems that there were some people who would take advantage of the church and “live in idleness.” To those, the command is: “Anyone unwilling to work should not eat.” But this is not a dictate of public policy. It’s a regulation for the community of the church, and the assumption is that the moochers are part of that community. They are lazy church members. People who come around for the potluck but never do any work around the church. You might know that in the first century the church was focused on feeding the poor; it was not only the right thing to do, but it made a deep impression on the Romans. The early Christians saw it as self-evident that if the rich and the poor were part of one body, they could not let their own body go hungry. 1 John 3:17 asks “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister [a fellow believer] in need, and yet refuses help?”

But the unintended consequence of this generosity was that it did attract some lazy people to church. And the practice of the church was to insist on individual responsibility *by taking part in the work of the community*. They didn’t say to them, “Get a job!” They said, “Here’s a broom, or a hoe, or a hammer. Work with us. If you’re going to be part of our community and share our food, we expect you to share our work.” The same thing is found in 1 Timothy 5 in a discussion of which widows should be placed on the list for free food. Those who were added to the list were expected—as they described service—to “wash the feet of the saints,” their fellow believers—to do dirty work around the church, to be servants and not just to be hanging around as gossips and busybodies.

But this takes for granted that the believers were together every day. The church was not a club that required an hour a week from them. The church was their community, their network of primary relationships. Of course they still related to employers and neighbors and friends, but they related to them as members of the Christian community. In every relationship they were “ambassadors for Christ.” When we think back to the early church described in Acts 2 as having everything in common and selling their possessions so that they could give to other church members who had need (44-45), we realize that we have moved pretty far from the communitarian side of the spectrum to the individualistic side. In Acts 4, it says that “All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had... There were no needy persons among them” (32, 34). Maybe, as skeptics say, this didn’t last very long, but it’s clear that this is Luke’s picture of the ideal church, the embodiment of what Paul meant when he talked about being one body. I’m not going to ask you this morning to place all your possessions in the offering plate, but I am going to ask you to approach both the offering and our business meeting with a sense of yourself not just as a free individual but as a member of the body of Christ.