



“LIVING THE GOOD LIFE”
SCRIPTURE: ROMANS 12: 9-21
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
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Romans 12: 9-21

12:9 Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good;

12:10 Love one another with mutual affection; out do one another in showing honor.

12:11 Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.

12:12 Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.

12:13 Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

12:14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.

12:15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

12:16 Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are.

12:17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.

12:18 If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

12:19 Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."

12:20 No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads."

12:21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

(Play video from beginning to 2:40 <https://youtu.be/C7qItGQFpuM>)

While the Bryant family had everything they dreamed about, Eddie Strickland, in Woodmere, Ohio in Cleveland was building his dream house with his own hands. He owned the property there and had been working for months. The first story was already completed. But white politicians, white neighbors, white co-workers, white business

owners had been busy creating the legal architecture they needed to keep Black people like Eddie from building houses in neighborhoods that they wanted to remain white.

The village constable threatened to arrest Eddie if he kept building his house--claiming that Eddie's use of second hand wood boards for subflooring was illegal. Eddie fought for his rights as a property owner, citing the fact that white property owners were allowed to use those same materials without penalty. He fought in the courts and in the newspapers--in Cleveland's Black weekly, the "Call and Post," Eddie said, "This is my lot and my property and I'm going to build a home on it or die in the attempt." But after 18 months of court battles, Eddie's dreams of building his own home were destroyed.

The Woodmere strategy worked--property laws, zoning laws, restrictive covenants, and overtly racist building regulations and policies protecting the creation of all white neighborhoods. The architecture of white supremacy that built the suburban explosion included a common strategy used all over America.

What makes life "good"?

Drill down to the condition that gives rise to this question--and it is relationship--togetherness. The good life somehow has to account for all of us--everyone.

One of Paul's foundational assumptions is that Christian community has a shared clarity about what is evil and what is good.

But it should be coming clear to all of us that white Christianity has called evil good, and called good evil throughout this country's history--and even today.

If Christians in America had kept the Jesus of the Bible at the center of how we build community, at the center of how we build relationships, then we would not be where we are today as a country.

The birth of the suburbs post WWII answered that question about the good life with policies, mythologies, programs and narratives.

The problem is, the suburbs were a white-washed answer to the question. How can the good life be good if it's built on sin--the sin of superiority, the sin of white supremacy?

(Image #1: PCUSA image "Racism and White Supremacy are sins")

This week our denomination engaged in a week of action around dismantling white supremacy. There were many, many powerful opportunities to learn, to advocate, to act, and to provoke justice. Our denomination has not always been so bold. So this week of action was also a week of reckoning for us as a white-dominant denomination.

The week offered great resources to strengthen our Christ-centered power analysis.

(Back to MMS)

We have been working together for the last four years at GCPC to strengthen our shared power analysis. We bring this power analysis to everything--to our relationships, to our structures, to the way we do church.

The need for us to get better at this power analysis is pressing. The mythology of suburbia is again being evoked in our culture to ignite racialized concepts of safety, opportunity, and American identity.

As Christians, our antenna should go up and our power analysis should kick in when we hear those tropes being trotted out.

There are eerie echoes this election season of the 1968 election season--uprisings crying out for justice for BIPOC were met with state sanctioned and white vigilante violence-- violence that was then blamed on those crying for justice. Then candidate Nixon used the volatility to fear monger and criminalize Black bodies and communities.

It is no coincidence that the shooting of Jacob Blake, a Black man, in Kenosha Wisconsin, 7 times in the back by a white police officer has played out as it is playing out. Be wise about how you sort through the rhetoric and the spin.

The Movement for Black Lives and Black Lives Matter are not leading violent protests. White people, supporters of the current President, are coming to peaceful protests with guns. And one of them, a 17 year old named Kyle Rittenhouse, murdered two people and seriously wounded another one in Kenosha.

White people are escalating the violence in our cities across the country. And then the blame for the violence is being turned back on the very people who are asking for the violence to stop. Without a power analysis you might get sucked into believing the protests are the problem.

The problem is police violence, the problem is state-sanctioned white supremacy and systemic racism.

Racist tropes about law and order, about chaos in our streets--we've got to be wiser than to fall for those lies again as a country. If we're ever going to discover together what living the good life truly is, then we have to have our power analysis fully deployed.

So remember the Bryant Family, from the video, in their dream house, and remember Eddie Strickland and the dream house he was building for his family with his own hands?

Let's practice using our shared power analysis. We'll go over some basics, but it's your job to go deeper. If you have questions, do some research.

Backlighting that video and the story of Eddie Strickland are racist policies and practices that our country is still impacted by today.

Side by side view (MMS & Slides)

(Slide #1: Urban Renewal in Asheville)

While the suburbs were calling to families seeking the “American Dream” around 1600 African American neighborhoods around the country were being destroyed by Urban Renewal from the 1950s to the 1970s. Urban Renewal was described as a way to “clean up blighted neighborhoods” across the country. But the reality of its implementation and impact tells a painful story, including in Asheville.

In Asheville, Urban Renewal began with the construction of the cross town expressway through the Hill Street Neighborhood in 1957. And continued into the 70s with the destruction of the East End and other Black neighborhoods.

If you want to learn more about the impacts of Urban Renewal in Asheville, check out the references I share in my sermon manuscript, which will be online at gcpcusa.org on Monday, and watch the reparations program on our YouTube channel.

(Slide #2: Redlining in Asheville)

At the same time Urban Renewal was tearing down Black neighborhoods, redlining was in full force in communities all over the United States, including Asheville.

Redlining is “a discriminatory practice that puts services (like loans to buy houses and start small businesses) out of reach for residents of certain areas based on race or ethnicity.” Neighborhoods were color-coded:

- green for “best,”
- blue for “still desirable,”
- yellow for “definitely declining”
- red for “hazardous.”

The “redlined” areas were the ones local lenders viewed as credit risks. The metrics for determining these classifications were racialized. Black neighborhoods were hazardous and white neighborhoods were best.

“Anyone who was not northern-European white was considered to be a detraction from the value of the area,” That’s a quote from Bruce Mitchell, one of the researchers who just recently did a comprehensive analysis of the impacts of redlining.

(Slide #3: Redlining all over America)

Take a quick look at some of the numbers about redlining in America.

In Macon today, 73 percent of formerly redlined neighborhoods remain low-to-moderate income. In Macon, 91 percent of formerly redlined neighborhoods are composed of minority populations.

Macon GA: Nearly 35 percent of blacks in Macon live in poverty today, compared with less than 13 percent of whites.

(Slide #4: Continued impacts of Redlining and Urban renewal)

- Root shock, Dr. Mindy Fullilove
- Generational wealth: At least 10x higher for whites than Black families. This has gotten worse in the last century.
- 3 out of 4 redlined neighborhoods in the U.S.A. are still struggling 80 years later.
- Gentrification has tended to be what shifts a neighborhood economically, but not to the advantage of native Black residents.
- The Levittown model of community creation.

(The developers of Levittown prohibited people of color from moving in through contract clauses, a common practice at the time. Restrictive racial covenants were recommended by the Federal Housing Administration to create homogenous communities.)

So the “good life” as its been packaged and sold in America is quickly dismantled when we bring a power analysis to bear.

(Back to full screen on MMS)

Bringing a power analysis to the passage in Paul about the good life that we read today is our next step. How does Paul’s description of beloved community, “the good life,” critique white supremacy culture?

(Slide #5 on white supremacy culture)

(Just a reminder about the character traits of white supremacy-go through the slide briefly. I’ve added the green ones)

(Slide #6 about Paul’s “good life”)

These are the character traits of the good life I drew from Paul’s words in Romans. There are aspects of Paul’s description that you may feel more drawn toward. Notice where your energy goes.

Paul is calling us to loathe, to even hate what is evil so much that we stake our lives on the good. This is about community, not isolated individuals.

I am drawn to Paul’s call for our love to be GENUINE--no pretense, nothing fake. It’s a direct contradiction to the way white supremacy prioritizes appearances and everything seeming fine even though things are not fine. That’s what I mean by systemic gaslighting. White supremacy has taught us to act like everything is ok when it’s not. It’s like an abusive relationship and it can drive us to madness with its spin and lies.

Paul calls us to a zestful, enthusiastic zeal about living this way. It’s the passion that ignites our spirits and our souls. And we are diligent in this way of life. We don’t give up! We are resilient, we have stamina, we are determined.

And just look at how Paul challenges the retributive, punitive models that consume our systems of justice!

Love is nonviolent, love is generous, love humanizes enemies and prioritizes your enemies seeing your humanity as well. There is such emotion in this--such beauty in the deep connection Paul is reminding us that we share with all people--including those who have harmed us.

What should really stand out for us, GCPC, is that in Christ there is NO SUCH THING AS SUPERIORITY!

The good is built on the goodness of our mutual humanity, the goodness of our mutual liberation.

[\(Back to full screen on MMS\)](#)

Living the good life isn't good if it is predicated on someone else's pain and oppression.

The future unfolding in these challenging times needs to center on what is most important--the quality of our relationships, the integrity of our togetherness.

America has yet to realize what living the good life could really be.

Paul has given us a way to take stock, a way to sharpen our power analysis, a way to clarify our vision and begin to glimpse our hopes and dreams.

This is our time! This is our healing opportunity! We have a chance to repair harm. We have a chance to heal. We have a chance to be at home with each other.

Just imagine what could be unfolding: living the good life could finally truly be good.

Thanks be to God.