

**Mayflower Community Congregational Church, UCC 4/7/19**

**“Stronger Together”**

**Romans 12: 2-3**

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I used to widely refer to myself as a non-conventional guy. I was a bicycle riding, coffee shop hopping hipster—aimlessly visiting one small café after another, knitting socks, listening to every album Radiohead made on a loop, writing in my journal, reading poetry, and spending copious amounts of time with friends not doing much else but enjoying the company of companions on the journey. I was newly sober, and enjoying a slimmer frame after shedding 90 lbs. This was my life when I lived in Rochester, NY. The mid- 2000’s was my heyday. I thought it was because of all the things I just mentioned. But, not until recently, I discovered there is even more that made Rochester my own personal heaven.

This time of my life was a time that was filled with community. Chock full of face to face, largely unplanned, community. There was always someone to share an experience with—a story with—a glimpse at beautiful landscape with. I remember riding my bike down residential streets and just stopping without any plans of stopping because I passed by a friend’s house randomly.

Manoush Zomorodi, host of NYC’s Note to Self and author of *Bored and Brilliant: How Spacing Out Can Unlock Your Most Productive and Creative Self*, helped to unlock some deeper truths around why Rochester is such a beloved relic in my soul’s rolodex of top ten life hits. Zomorodi writes, “In a *Wired* piece by Steven Levy, the cofounder of Apple—nostalgic for the long, boring summers of his youth that stoked his curiosity

because ‘out of curiosity comes everything’- expressed concern about the erosion of boredom from the kind of devices he helped create.”<sup>1</sup>

During these past few weeks, I remembered a really important detail about living in Rochester that I cannot believe I had not thought of before now. I spent so much time living in the moment, wandering out of curiosity. Waking up each day with a thirst to leave my house and discover something new about myself through the environment that I lived in. I used to welcome life as a kind of scavenger hunt—the quest was to find myself in the midst of creation.

Rochester, NY was the last place I lived when I did not have a smart phone. There were no tweets of impending doom to wake up to. No way of connecting with friends and community unless I wrote them a tedious email, called them up, or biked over to their house.

That’s not to say I haven’t benefited from smart phones, or other forms of computer technology. Technology has been a helpful part of my life, and for some lives, it’s a necessity. At some point though, I became isolated due to a slow tethering that happened of my life to a piece of technology. This tether has distanced me from one thing that I love the most: Face to face connection. Like, talking to strangers about the weather in the elevator. Or, going to a store to purchase a book and chatting the employees up about their favorite reads. I am aware this sounds a bit like an introvert’s nightmare. But, for me human contact is like breathing. Lately, I’ve been feeling a little suffocated. I miss being an unconventional guy.

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<sup>1</sup> (Zomorodi 2017)

You know who else was an unconventional guy? Paul. The Paul who most definitely wrote the letter to the Romans that contains the bit of scripture that we are focusing on today. The same Paul who kind of marched to the beat of his own drum. Who often times questioned rules. Or, questioned Jewish law, and whether it applied to gentiles wanting to convert to Christianity. Though, there are times I can point an incriminating finger at pieces of Paul's theological beliefs, there were some good parts to Paul, too. Just like all of all us. Some good. Some bad. Paul's unconventional side though. That seems to be good.

This letter Paul writes to the Roman Gentiles who converted to Christianity is super unique. His letters are pretty much always written to communities that he helped start. He didn't help start the community of Roman gentiles that this letter was written to. Also, Paul liked to write letters to communities that needed some help. Not the case for the Romans. This letter to the Romans was more of a heads up based on Paul's experiences in Jerusalem, where gentiles were expected to first convert to Judaism before converting to Christianity. This meant these Christian converts had to adhere to Jewish law first. Anyway, that's just some backstory. Most important part is Paul being an unconventional rule breaker. A rule breaker who was worried the Romans would fall down the same law rabbit hole that Jerusalem had fallen down. Paul says faith is enough, whether you are a Jew who has followed the law, or a gentile, who has not.

This piece of Paul's letter to the Romans that we are focusing on today is Paul giving us some guidance for everyday life. "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. For by the grace given to me I say to everyone

among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgement, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.”<sup>2</sup>

In my mind, the unconventional choice to make today is to choose boredom over clicking on apps. Not to say we won't still click on apps. We will. With boredom can bring time to wonder what God's will is. The unconventional choice to make today is to come together as a community in person and stand hand in hand with hundreds of like-minded folks outside the capital. Being a member of Pantsuit nation on Facebook is all fine and good—serving up an order of realness to a troll on a comment feed can feel great. I know because I've done—a lot. But, neither of these things is more power than showing up together in real life to tell our story through a critical mass.

Brene Brown is a professor of social work at the University of Houston, and a super prolific author of books whose focus are on topics such as fear, courage, imperfection, wholeheartedness and more. The following piece of her book “Braving the Wilderness” sketches a beautiful testament to the magic of being together. She writes, “As a crowd of students and professors gathers around Dumbledore's body, an evil face appears in the dark sky. It is the face of Voldemort, the person responsible for Dumbledore's death. As Harry places a hand on Dumbledore's chest and continues to weep, Dumbledore's dearest friend and fellow teacher, Professor McGonagall, played brilliantly by Dame Maggie Smith, raises her wand to the sky. From the tip of the wand comes a single burst of light. One by one, each student and teacher raises his or her wand to create a constellation of light that overcomes the dark and menacing sky.

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<sup>2</sup> Romans 12: 2- 3 (NRSV)

At that moment in a movie theatre in Houston, a universe away from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, I looked around to find that two hundred strangers, most of them with tears on their cheeks, had their hand in the air, pointing imaginary wands to the sky. Why? Because we believe in the light. Yes, we know that Harry Potter is not real, but we know that collective light *is* real. And powerful. And in the face of hatred and bigotry and cruelty and everything that dark sky stood for, we were so much stronger together.”<sup>3</sup>

Maybe that’s why we come to church. This Sunday more than any other Sunday of the month is our moment to stand collectively in the light. Communion is a time that Jesus claimed we are stronger together. I’m all for church online. That type of thing does exist, where folks all take communion together in front of their computer screens. And, it can be meaningful. But nothing beats the feeling of everyone being together in the same room, bumping into one another on our way to and from our seats, hearing a youth utter the words, “bread of life,” seeing the looks in one another’s eyes as we reclaim love as our life source. We really are stronger together. In the flesh. Right in front of each other.

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<sup>3</sup> (Brown 2017)

## **Bibliography**

Rom. 12: 2-3 (NRSV)

In *Braving the Wilderness*, by Brene Brown, 124-125. New York: Random House, 2017.

In *Bored and Brilliant: How Spacing Out Can Unlock Your Most Productive and Creative Self*, by Manoush Zomorodi, 28. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2017.