

Romans 12:3-8

**“High Hopes”**

The Rev. Dr. Jean Halligan Vandergrift, Interim Minister

Roslindale Congregational Church (UCC), Boston MA

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, July 12, 2020

“Just what makes that little old ant think he’ll move that rubber tree plant? Anyone knows an ant, *can’t* move a rubber tree plant!”

This Sinatra song won awards in 1959, and it suggests what seems to be true about the world *today* too: **there are a lot of big, stubborn ‘rubber tree plants’ that need to be dislodged.** There are multiple, complex injustices that don’t align with *God’s* desires for us and for life on this planet. A few come right to mind for me: exploitation of the environment, systemic racism, structural economic inequities, sex trafficking and the abuse of the vulnerable – people of color, children, women, soldiers, and the elderly, plus partisan politics, which exacerbates the spread of the Virus. That’s a lot standing in the way of God’s will!

So when the church is trying to make “God’s love and justice real,” as our United Church of Christ motto expresses our purpose, or to usher in God’s righteousness and justice, as the book of Romans calls it, **you and I may be tempted to believe that we cannot move those big rubber tree plants!**

Do *you* feel puny this morning? Inadequate to the task? Maybe you’re thinking that *RCC* doesn’t have what it needs to deal with all the hurdles to God’s will – that it’s lacking the numbers, the dollars, or the smarts. “Jean, we don’t have the time, the muscles, or the unity. We need more compassion, giving, and leadership! **Where should we even *begin* to remove these big things for God?!**”

This morning, let’s consider the situation that our faith ancestors faced in the time when the apostle Paul wrote to the church in Rome. The good news of Jesus Christ was not being heard widely, nor valued in their city or in the empire. Rome was not expecting to be uprooted by an upstart, crucified carpenter! It already considered itself the center of justice, and its emperor, the “Lord.” This was not a democracy of the people, and the concept of “god” was little “g” and plural. Christianity was just one religious sect group among many, and within this little congregation there were tensions between Jewish and Gentile Christ followers. How in the world were *they* strong enough to carry out God’s great goals?!

**Basically, Paul’s answer is that TOGETHER, we are the BODY OF CHRIST, equipped by the HOLY SPIRIT, who gives Christians and the church special strengths for mission. Indeed, God has given us *exactly* what gifts we need, in combination and collaboration – the gifts we need for GOD to work *through* us!**

This summer the sermons will explore five bible passages that list nineteen spiritual gifts; seven of them are identified in verse six of today’s reading. As we learn more about them, we will start to see some of these gifts and graces in each other and will then become better positioned to discern where to *put our push*.

Luther's mighty Reformation hymn says: "We will not fear for God hath willed his truth to triumph through us...*The Spirit and the gifts are ours.*"<sup>1</sup> Or to put this message in the vernacular of that popular song: like the ant, we've "got HIGH HOPES; we've got HIGH HOPES; we've got high, apple pie, in the sky, hopes!"

During these sermons, on Zoom we are able to take a few minutes to reflect upon the spiritual gifts *together*. So each week, I will pose at least one question for our reflection. Here it is for this Sunday:

**Of the seven spiritual gifts listed in Romans 13, which of these stand out to you as being most important for carrying out God's work in the times in which we live?**

**Prophecy, Service, Teaching, Exhortation, Generous Giving, Leadership, Compassion?**

---

<sup>1</sup>"A Mighty Fortress is our God."