

## The Next Chapter II – Refuge in the Storm

### INTRO

In the early morning hours of April 15, 1912, the “unsinkable” cruise ship called the RMS Titanic sank beneath the ice cold waves of the Atlantic Ocean.

1500 people drowned that morning. Only about 700 survived.

A handful of those survivors escaped the sinking ship on board what was called “**lifeboat no.1.**” They were mostly men (despite the call for “women and children first”) and a good number of them were very wealthy first-class passengers.

Two notable survivors on lifeboat no.1 were [image: Gordons] Sir Cosmo Duff Gordon (an Olympian and wealthy landowner) and his wife Lady Lucy Duff Gordon (a famous fashion designer).

It seems clear that the Gordons did not have **their priorities** entirely in line. As the Titanic sank beneath the waves and hundreds drowned, Lady Gordon’s response was, reportedly, “There goes your beautiful nightdress, gone!”

It’s rumored that the Gordons convinced (or possibly bribed) the crew members of the lifeboat **NOT to row back** for any more survivors. They felt it was too risky and that they might get pulled under.

**So they rowed away from the wreckage.**

We don’t know all the details for sure, but we do know this: when the RMS Carpathia rescued lifeboat no.1, a boat designed to hold 40 passengers, **only 12** were on board.

It really makes you wonder what would have happened if these survivors had spent a little more time thinking beyond themselves, if they had rowed in the other direction...

I tell you this story because in many ways it's a perfect analogy for what is happening in the Church in America right now.

**The Church is like a lifeboat** in the middle of a dangerous ocean. Humanity has been shipwrecked by sin and brokenness. Our world is splintering and sinking around us. Violence, anxiety, hatred, loneliness and pain... We're drowning.

If it wasn't for the lifeboat of God's grace, we would *all* be sinking beneath the waves.

But thanks to **the sacrifice of Jesus**, we can now have hope of salvation - of restoration. Not just for ourselves, but for our entire world. On this sturdy lifeboat we no longer have to live in fear.

And guess what? Good news! There's plenty of room to spare.

And yet, how many in the Church today tend to treat this situation just like Sir and Lady Gordon? Looking out for number 1, **rowing away from the wreckage**, and treating the other survivors in the water as an unfortunate afterthought?

What kind of a lifeboat do we want Grace Church to be?

Do we want to turn inward, hunker down, and wait to be rescued? Or are we willing to turn back? **Rowing into the danger**, into the mess... risking our comfort and safety in the hope that we can help more broken people into the lifeboat and into their salvation?

SERIES INTRO

That's what I want to talk about today.

This is the final week of our series, "The Next Chapter." The first three weeks were focused on my dad's perspective as the founding senior pastor of Grace about where God has taken us as a church.

These final three weeks are my chance - as the *new* senior pastor - to talk about **where I believe God is taking us next**. Who we are as a community and how I think that will play out in the days ahead.

Two weeks ago I talked about the concept of **self-giving love** - the posture we take as Christ-followers - which I believe will continue to shape us into a radically multigenerational, multicultural, and compassionate community.

Last week I talked about “**the humble pursuit of truth**,” our open-palmed approach to walking the path God has for us - which I believe will lead us into an ever-deepening understanding of the richness of Christ’s love.

Today, as we end this series, I want to talk about our approach to this broken world. Our approach to the shipwreck of sin and brokenness.

And, to give away the ending, I’ll tell you now that **I believe we are called to be a lifeboat that’s open to all**. Or, to use another metaphor, we are called to be a shelter in the storm.

#### ROMANS SETUP

So let’s talk about what that means. To do that, I want to look at a passage in the letter the Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Rome. Before we go there, though, I want to set the stage a little bit with some of the “world *behind* the text.”

Rome was essentially the capital of the world back then. It was a conglomeration of people from all over the empire. **Different tribes and languages and economic classes** rubbing shoulders all the time. It was cosmopolitan.

The *Church* in Rome reflected that diversity, and all over the city you had small house churches made up of all kinds of different people - Jews and Gentiles, Roman citizens and barbarians, landowners and slaves... all

following Christ together.

But as the Church was multiplying, two significant things started to happen: first, because Roman culture was very honor-based, you began to see people in the church who didn't want to associate with people they thought were beneath them. So an **economic and social divide** began in the church.

Second, the Roman emperor Claudius kicked all Jewish people out of Rome. Which meant the church was, for a time, primarily Gentile. And again, in an honor-based society, it didn't take long for these **Gentile Christians** to think of themselves as better than their Jewish brothers and sisters, even once they returned to Rome.

So Paul's whole letter is essentially addressing these divides creeping into the Church. And his message is, basically, "you guys have got to change your thinking and become one again. Not because, oh, we should all just get along, but because if we're not together in this, we're not going to survive. The message of Jesus depends on it."

You see, this was the time period when **persecution** against Christians was starting to rise. Violence, injustice, government sanctioned executions...

The storm was growing stronger. Or, to use our Titanic analogy, more and more survivors were drowning in the water of the world's brokenness. The message of God's salvation was under threat. **This was not the time for the Roman Church to become an exclusive club and start rowing the other direction.**

Now, our world is vastly different than that of Ancient Rome, but man... it feels like we are in the middle of a storm, too, doesn't it? It feels like there are forces threatening to tear us apart. I think these words are going to speak to us as well.

ROMANS 12

So, let's read what Paul encourages the church in *Rome* to be in the midst of

the storm and see what we can learn about the future of Grace Church.

### **Romans 12:9**

Paul has just finished talking about everyone using the gifts God has given them to build up the Church, and then he says this.

#### **Romans 12:9-16**

*Don't just pretend to love others. Really love them. Hate what is wrong. Hold tightly to what is good. Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other. Never be lazy, but work hard and serve the Lord enthusiastically. Rejoice in our confident hope. Be patient in trouble, and keep on praying. When God's people are in need, be ready to help them. Always be eager to practice hospitality.*

*Bless those who persecute you. Don't curse them; pray that God will bless them. Be happy with those who are happy, and weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with each other. Don't be too proud to enjoy the company of ordinary people. And don't think you know it all!*

Alright. So, to withstand the storm of persecution and division, Paul presents several **ideals** the Church must live up to. There's a lot we could dig into here but I want to look at a few of them.

First, he says in v.9, "Don't just pretend to love others. Really love them." He pleads with the Christians in Rome to practice ***genuine love***. Genuine affection. That's the first ideal.

So, what is it that makes love genuine?

Well, look at verse 10. "Take *delight* in honoring each other." This is a pretty wild thing to ask of the Romans. Remember, this was an **honor-based society**. Your honor and status were everything.

The very normal thing to do as a Roman was to take delight in **honoring yourself**. To have a fancy title after your name, to get your generous

deeds listed on a plaque somewhere, to become influential so others would want to come to your dinner parties...

The idea of spending energy and resources honoring someone *else*, much less to take *delight* in that, was crazy.

But that's what Paul is calling them to. In Greek, he literally says, when it comes to honoring one another... "*lead the way.*" Some translations say "outdo one another."

In other words, "see who can lift up and honor and esteem others the most." Delight in this. **It's a race to the bottom.** Or, in other words, it's self-giving love.

In verse 14, Paul echoes the teachings of Jesus from the sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5. "Bless those who persecute you." In other words, love your enemies. It's easy to honor people you like. But what about people who are out to get you?

Paul knows that for this community of Jesus-followers to survive in this broken world, and to help others onto the lifeboat of God's grace, **they must learn how to set their own interests aside** - to give of themselves for one another, even their enemies.

They've got to row back toward the shipwreck and look for survivors. Honor others, and not themselves.

So that's the first ideal: **In the Church, we are racing to the bottom.** (Self-giving love.)

The second ideal Paul introduces has to do with how we respond to the things God calls us to.

In verse 11, Paul tells his readers to "work hard and serve the Lord enthusiastically." I love the Greek phrase he uses: literally he tells them

to “**boil in the Spirit.**” It’s more than just enthusiasm. It’s bubbling up and boiling over in how fervent we are to live out God’s purposes.

Why should we be so passionate? Well, look at the next verse. “Rejoice in our confident hope.” What is that hope? It’s **the hope of New Creation** - the hope of restoration, of resurrection. The hope of an eternity with God in a world made right.

With that hope overflowing in us, why wouldn’t we “be patient in trouble”? we know better days are ahead.

Why wouldn’t we be “ready to help”? **We want to participate in that restoration.**

And why wouldn’t we be “always eager to practice hospitality” - to welcome others into our lives? If that hope is boiling and bubbling out of us, then **we want others to join us in that expectation.** To join us in the lifeboat. “Come on in! You can be made new!”

So there’s the second ideal: **In the Church, we are overflowing with hope.**

Finally, as he does many other places, Paul urges the church in Rome to be unified.

He says in verse 15, “Be happy with those who are happy and weep with those who weep.” There are some of you who are very empathetic people, so this comes naturally to you. But for everyone else, think about what Paul is saying here: let your emotions be dictated by the emotions of one another.

In verse 16, he says “live in harmony with one another.” The Greek here means more than just working together. It carries the idea of **sharing your mind. Thinking together.**

So imagine that: sharing your emotions, sharing your thoughts... This is tough for those of us raised in a hyper-individualistic culture, but this is the kind of

unity Paul is calling the Church to practice.

And then he throws in this zinger: “Don’t be too proud to enjoy the company of ordinary people.” Again, **honor-based society**. In Rome, who you associate with tells the world how important you are. And Paul is calling them to set that aside for the sake of harmony.

So put those ideas together. Emotional empathy, thinking together, associating with everyone regardless of status.

This is the kind of unity which helps the church weather the storm. So the third ideal is this: **In the Church, we are one.**

Again, there is a lot we could dig into here, but I think it’s important to step back and take a look at the picture Paul is painting. If the Church is going to be a refuge in the storm, this is what the community of faith must look like:

**We are racing to the bottom.**

Radically self-giving, honoring and elevating one another, instead of ourselves.

**We are overflowing with hope.**

Driven by a powerful vision of New Creation in Christ, letting that hope drive us to wildly hospitable lifestyles.

**We are one.**

Unified in a way the world can’t understand. One in Spirit. One in empathy. One in love.

Some part of Paul’s message must have hit home for the church in Rome. Because in the days after Paul wrote this letter **the storm did come**. Persecution, violence, plague...

And yet through it all, **the church grew stronger**, more unified. Many, many discovered their salvation in Jesus and their place in this radically

loving family of God.

Despite its early divisions, the church in Rome became a refuge in the storm.

## GRACE CHURCH

So what about us? **What about Grace Church?** Are we ready to be a refuge in the storm?

Because let's face it: there is a storm coming. There are survivors drowning in the waters of *our* broken world today.

On one hand, **the American Church is shrinking** faster than ever before. We've lost relevancy in our culture, young people are leaving the faith in droves, and we've never been more divided. Politics, ideology, culture wars...

(Well, there is one thing we all have in common. Everyone seems very, very **angry**.)

The American Church is in decline.

Meanwhile, **the brokenness of our community** is reaching a fever pitch. A global pandemic, violence, injustice, hatred, anxiety, rampant immorality, the opioid epidemic, a decaying planet...

The things the Church is supposed to stand for: love, healing, hope... are needed now more than ever. **We are the lifeboat.** We're the body of Christ - we are the ones who are supposed to heal the broken places of our world!

So what are we going to do? As we look ahead to the next chapter of Grace, what are we going to do?

Well, the short answer is: **what we've always done.**

We are going to continue to listen to the voice of the Spirit - to jump in where

*he's* moving - and dedicate ourselves to healing the brokenness of our world in Jesus' name.

What does that mean, practically?

Well, I believe it means Grace is being called to be a community which **loves and pursues everyone God puts in our path**. It means we will look for ways to "honor one another." To lift one another up, especially those in need.

If you are struggling with **anxiety** or **depression** or **grief** or **pain**, this is a community that cares and you are welcome here.

If you are facing **economic hardship**, you are not a charity case to us; you are one of us.

If you're a **messed up sinner**? A broken person with an ugly past, with addictions, caught in spirals of shame? If that's you, you are welcome here too. And you don't have to pretend that you've got it all together.

Sure, we will call you to something greater. We'll walk with you towards healing and freedom because you have a destiny in that. But you don't have to be perfect. You are welcome here just as you are.

Do you know why? Because **we're broken too**. Every one of us. We are only on this lifeboat because of the grace of God. None of us earned our way into this spiritual family. You are a child of God and you have just as much of a right to be here as anyone.

Grace Church has been on a journey of hope and healing since day one, and I fully intend for us to stay on that path.

We will be a community that **races to the bottom** in our honoring of one another. We will consider others as better than ourselves.

We will be a church that **overflows with compassion.**

When we see people of different skin tones, or nationalities, or genders, or sexual orientations than ourselves who are facing injustice and hatred in our world, our first reaction will not be defensiveness or self-righteousness. It will be mercy.

“There goes an image-bearer of God. How can I love them well?”

Ultimately, **we will be a church that is one.** One in Christ. Unified in our mission. And we will not let our world divide us. Not by political parties, not by ideologies, and not by self-interest. We will be one.

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Now, I know that’s a lot to process. And I know there is no possible way I can guarantee that all of those things will be true of us all the time. We will mess up. **We have growing to do.**

But I hope you hear my heart in all of this. As your senior pastor, I believe God is calling me to help lead us toward these ideals. **There is a storm coming in our nation. But we will be a refuge in that storm.**

We are in the lifeboat of God’s grace. And I know which direction we are rowing.

[PRAY]