

COURSE CORRECTION

Many of you know that I do a lot of swimming. I've been so very grateful that I have been able to swim a lot the last two months at our community pool. I miss open water swimming though, and I can hardly wait to get into the bay or the ocean and swim in a natural body of water. There's a big difference between open water swimming and swimming in a lap pool. The lap pool lanes are clearly marked with ropes, a bold stripe on the bottom is clearly marked, the water is calm and clear and it's easy to see where you are going. And especially these days, you're usually by yourself in a lane. Sometimes I'm by myself in a six lane pool!

Of course in a natural body of water, there are no lanes, the water is often murky and can be rough, with waves and currents and chop. I've done some open water swimming in competition, and in that setting you have the added difference of lots of people swimming together in close quarters, especially at the beginning of the race, bumping into one another and adding to the challenge. It can be hard to breathe, too, because at times just as you lift your head to take a breath, a wave hits and you get a mouthful of water instead of air. It's really hard to see where you are going, and in these events, there is a finish line. It's nearly impossible to swim in a straight line from start to finish. Once I swam in an event where I had to swim across the Delaware River from Fort Delaware to the western shore. The finish line was about a mile away, very hard to see. Someone advised me to find a clear point, a landmark, an object or something I could see that was near the finish line and if I oriented myself to swim towards that point, I would get to the finish line. I remember nearby the finish was a building with a bright red roof that could be readily seen from the water. I focused on swimming to that point. I would veer from side to side, adding more distance and time to my swim, but I eventually made it. You see, I had to make a course correction once in a while to get to the finish line.

It seems that life in the world is a lot more like open water swimming than swimming in a pool. I believe it helps in life, to know to where you are trying to go.

As Christians, most of us want to get to God in some way. For me, it's trying to get to the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven that Jesus talks about in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In John, Jesus says, I am the way. But the Kingdom of God is nearly impossible to see, although I think we can catch glimpses of it from time to time. Bible scholars have described it "as a process, a course of events, whereby God begins to govern or act as a king or Lord" and shows us who God is. To get there, maybe we need to find a clear point that we know is near that kingdom and focus on getting there. That point may be justice. As MLK, Jr. famously said, "The arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice." I believe we are heading toward justice, but we often veer from side to side and it's taking a long time to get there. Our history in the United States can be seen in generally following that arc. Consider where we are today, compared to where we were fifty, one hundred, two hundred, four hundred years, ago. Of course, we made grave mistakes through terrible injustice but getting to justice requires us to continually make course corrections. But it's not just justice. Nearby justice are love, kindness, mercy, and humility as we walk (or, in this metaphor, swim) with God.

Paul's letter to the Romans offers amazing words of ways we can move toward God's kingdom. This is a remarkable passage, especially coming from Paul, who, according to Luke in the Acts of the Apostles was once the one "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord." Of course, then Paul was known as Saul until he met Jesus on the road to Damascus. Maybe that's what it takes for some to be able to learn to act like a Christian. A bolt of lightning knocking you down and blinding you to make you truly see what God wants from you.

Many of us, though, come into being a Christian much less dramatically because we are blessed with the faith and the realization that God really does love us. Because God loves us so much, we really ought to love God back. How better to do that than to love those who are God's children—our families, our friends, our

neighbors, and yes, even our enemies. We can love them by doing them justice with kindness and mercy.

In today's passage Paul gives us about two dozen ways to act like a Christian, bookended by verse 9, "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good" and verse 21, "Do not be overcome with evil, but overcome evil with good." Doesn't that sound like justice? True justice, though, must be tempered with mercy and love. We have a lot of obstacles in our way, including those who would use violence to get to that justice. But that's not the Christian way. Paul gives us a Christian way to stay on course, a way that follows Jesus' teaching and a way that is governed by love. Love is the theme here. In a U2 song, we hear, "Love is bigger than anything in it's way." We hear that, too, in these verses.

Obviously, this is not an easy list of Do's and Don'ts to follow. We will stray from the course, often. I know I do. That's why Paul includes the advice to "persevere in prayer." We need to pray for God to be with us and guide us on our way and keep us on the right course. Let Paul's letter, inspired by God, help guide our way to the Kingdom of God.

(Reread verses 9-21)