

**Ben Lattimer**  
**Sunday Service, Sermon**  
**November 5, 2023**  
**On Romans 12**  
***Chopping Wood***

## **Sermon**

*Intro / Hook Story - Rutherford Falls*

“The wood pile is around back... Start chopping.” I don’t know what exactly Reagan had expected, when Terry had offered to help her rebuild relationships with the tribe - but this was decidedly not it....

The show is called *Rutherford Falls*. It’s set in the fictional town of - well - Rutherford Falls, set in upstate New York, a community that includes the reservation that is home to the fictional *Minishonka* tribe.

Reagan is part of the tribe, though her relationships within it are somewhat... complicated. She was engaged to the son of one of the tribe’s elders, and may have left him standing at the altar to explore the wider world and pursue her education. Now she’s back, with visions of creating a museum - a Minishonka cultural center, but most of the tribe will have little to do with her. Except for Terry - one of the leaders of the tribe. He takes Reagan under his wing, and says he’ll set up meetings together with various members of the tribe’s council - to work on repairing the relationship...

When they get to the first house, Reagan has her speech all prepared. She starts to head into the house together with Terry and the elder, when Terry stops her. “The wood pile is around back,” he says. “Start chopping...”

## *Series Recap*

Over the course of this series, we’ve been reflecting on the ways that we are called to be stewards - to care for that which has been entrusted to us, so that those resources might do what they were intended to do. We often think of stewardship in terms of financial resources, but as we have discovered week after week, it’s really about so much more.

## *Social Capital*

Robert Putnam was a sociologist who developed the idea of “Social Capital”. These are the social connections - the relationships we invest in. And since the time and energy we put into those relationships is a finite resource, we all make choices - which relationships we commit to - and how much. Where we spend our “social capital”...

Another sociologist, Marc Dunkelman, explored the ways those investments have shifted over time. He describes three different rings of relationships: Our inner ring relationships are fewer but deeper - family and a few close friends, our closest colleagues and co-workers.

We have more outer ring relationships. Acquaintances, maybe people you share a hobby with, or whose kids play soccer with your kids. Maybe this includes the people you connect with over social media.

Then, in-between these two inner and outer rings, Dunkelman describes a third middle ring. These are the people with whom we are familiar and connected, even if we aren't intimately so. Other co-workers or fellow students, neighbors. Church families. It's these middle ring relationships they suggest that traditionally shaped the fabric of our society - knitting us together.

Now here's the thing. Both Putnam and Dunkelman - and others, have noted the ways that our investment of our social capital has shifted over time. It's not a new dynamic, though it's certainly been accelerated by recent trends. John Vest puts it like this, he says: The rise of the automobile, suburban sprawl, "telephones, radio, and television... [- even before the advent of] the Internet and mobile [phones] have made it easier and easier to invest in relationships of choice rather than relationships of proximity."

No longer limited to connections with the people who are near to us - we have as a society by and large divested of the middle ring relationships, investing our time and energy instead in outer and inner ring relationships. We've moved into what Vest calls a state of "Networked Individualism." And it comes with a cost... These middle ring communities - these connections we have lost were the fabric that tied us together. We end up in these generational and ideological silos - increasingly disconnected and polarized.

### *Back to the Scripture*

Our scripture today from Romans reminds us why the church matters - why *this* community matters. Because these relationships are inviting us into a different way of being together. This is the community that transforms...

*Do not be conformed to the patterns of this world, but be transformed...*

We invest in this community as an act of faith, because these people who invite us to *hate what is evil and hold on tight to what is good...* These people who remind us to love - not just each other but all those who bear the image of God like members of our own family. This is the community that reminds us to feed even our enemies - that remind us that evil is not overcome with evil - that remind us to overcome evil with good. These are the people in whom we find the strength and hope and grace to carry on...

These are the promises we make to one another - not because we know what the future holds, but precisely because we do not! So we make these promises about who we want to be and who we want to be with... The people who weep with us when we grieve and rejoice with us in moments of celebration. The proverbial village helping raise our children. Generations all together.

*Investing our Social Capital*

That's why we invest our social capital here with one another. It's an act of faith - an investment over the long haul. Because the reality is it's these little investments over time that build these relationships that really matter...

*Rutherford Falls - Reprise*

"The wood pile is around back... Start chopping."

"What?!" Reagan exclaimed. "I thought you set up these meetings so we could talk to each other, so I could, you know, *apologize* and get their support for the museum."

"I said we were working to build relationships."

"But chopping wood?"

"Do you know how much wood I've chopped?" Terry replies. "How many cars I've washed? How many cookies I've baked? How many people I've helped move? This is part of the work. This is how we build and repair relationships."

What follows is a montage of Reagan visiting neighbors and chopping wood. Washing cars. Caulking a bathroom. Calling BINGO for the seniors at the senior center. And sitting in on one very awkward conversation as her ex-fiance's mother talks to Terry (in front of her) about the pain of that wedding day when the bride never showed up... And at the end of it all, there is a new beginning.

It was never really about the wood. Instead, each of these small acts are an investment in a relationship. Because relationships - with close friends, with colleagues and co-workers, with a church family - relationships aren't actually made up of one or two big memorable moments... It's the thousand little moments, caring - investing in each other week after week over the years that make the relationships that count.

So keep on chopping wood. A little bit at a time, together creating the fabric of this community that changes lives - including your own.

Amen.