

SUNDAY, September 6, 2020

Romans 13:8-14 (NRSV)

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

In this text we learn about the relationship between love and the Law. Both Jews and Gentiles continue to be called to obey the commandments, and Paul teaches that this is accomplished by loving our neighbors.

It's easy to think of our neighbors and those living in the apartment across the hall or in the house beside us. We wave at them as we leave for work in the morning. They collect our mail when we're on vacation, and maybe we exchange a plate of cookies with them during the holidays. These are all good and friendly gestures, but is that really the only demonstration of love that Paul was talking about?

We need to broaden who we define as our neighbor. Neighbors are more than those we live close to in proximity. Isn't it really all of God's children including the poor, the elderly, widows and orphans, strangers? If we're really serious about loving our neighbors, it isn't just about the friendly gestures mentioned. We must also be ready to guard and protect their well-being.

In our contemporary world we are aware of the plight of those who live under oppression, those living in fear, used and enslaved, wondering if they will ever know another way of living. Far too many people are hungry, in need of adequate housing and health care. Far too many are treated unjustly because of their gender, skin color, age, ethnicity, faith tradition. Far too many are lonely, living in despair. All are God's children, our brothers and sisters, our neighbors. All are neighbors. All need our love.

Questions to Ponder

- How can I demonstrate love for my neighbors - in my neighborhood, in my community, around the world?

Prayer

God of all there has been, is and will be, create in me a heart and mind that demonstrates love for all of my neighbors. Help me to see ways that I can work against the oppression, that I can guard and protect the well-being of my neighbor. Amen.

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 13, 2020

Romans 14:1-12 (NRSV)

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God.

We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written,

“As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.”

So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

Paul is writing to an emerging Christian community in Rome with a diversity of traditions and perspectives. This text addresses how members of these early churches relate to one another, and how they relate to outsiders. Paul teaches that conflict can be prevented due to differences in opinion and power differentials because of status, authority, and self-efficacy.

The local church continues to have a diversity of opinion and power differentials. What does it mean to be an “observant” Christian? Are there particular rules, practices, or habits to be observed? Must we wear a cross, carry a Bible, confess that we are born again, adhere to a particular political

party, only socialize with like-minded persons? What about other faith traditions - must all Jews be pro-Israel? Must all Muslim woman wear burkas?

In our modern context, we seem to be really good at pointing out what Christians, Jews, Muslims, or followers of another faith tradition must embody or display to be considered “observant”. I would argue it has led to much conflict and polarization among members of many churches and how those congregations relate to outsiders.

I wonder if a reminder of last week’s scripture about following the Law would be helpful. Perhaps being “observant” is really about loving your neighbor.

Questions to Ponder

- Am I aware of opinions or differences in power differentials that could lead to conflict between me and other members at North, between me and others visiting or new to North?
- What does it means to be an observant Christian?

Prayer

God of love. May love guide how we relate with one another in our church community. Help us to avoid judgment and to embrace one another as your children, brothers and sisters. Amen.

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 20, 2020

Philippians 1:21-30 (NRSV)

For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.

Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well— since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

Paul writes this letter while imprisoned, charged with capital crimes by the Roman government. Crimes that could be punishable by death. Yet we hear words that encourage finding joy and hope even in the most difficult, troubling times of our lives. We are called to live with hope, during the best of times, the worst of times.

Victor Frankl, psychoanalyst and Holocaust survivor wrote Man's Search for Meaning, a book that addresses how we find meaning in life, and how important it is to search for a life of hope and joy. Frankl talks about how people lost hope in the concentration camps during World War II, robbing them of the will to live and meet life's challenges. He said that people begin to die when they lose hope, but Paul resists that loss of hope by arguing that God desires that we experience life and not death. We are called to choose life.

How do we choose to embrace hope, and joy in our lives? Paul says we must look beyond ourselves, our own particular circumstances. We will all face challenging times in our lives - times when we feel imprisoned, when

the walls seem to be imploding around us, but we can face them with hope. We have a choice - either give in to defeat, to death, or know that within the depths of our greatest despair, proclaim that Christ lives and that ultimately God is good and will remain.

As we continue to live in a time of pandemic and the continued oppression of particular people, cling to hope. Find joy. Cling to life. Christ lives. God is good, remains with us, and will lead us out of these challenging times.

Questions to Ponder

- How does this text speak to me in the midst of these challenging times in our contemporary world?
- How can I cling to hope, cling to life?

Prayer

Protector God. Ease my despair when faced with challenging times. Lead me toward hope and life. Amen.

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 27, 2020

Philippians 2:1-13 (NRSV)

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Can others see Christ in you? We are called to live a life that reflects Christ. It's a challenge, and it's not easy. We're not perfect. None of us can absolutely impersonate Christ, but we can strive to to adopt Christlike attitudes and behaviors.

I also believe it's obvious that living the kind of life that reflects Christ cannot be achieved apart from God. In this scripture, Paul points out that "God is already at work in you". We are often called to live in ways that may be out-of-sync with the prevailing culture. Christian living is a process, and we begin with a decision to reflect Christ through our behaviors - how we speak, how we act. How do we express our love for others?

Are we complacent when the oppression of others is in our sight? Are we willing to take on a prophetic role to call out injustice? Do we turn away from those who's income does not provide the latest fashion in their

clothing, those not possessing the latest iPhone or unable to go to the most popular restaurant in town? Are we willing to say a kind word and be with those who are lonely, frightened, in despair? Will I welcome the stranger?

God will lead the way. The Spirit works in and through us, and we only need to let our hearts and minds be transformed, and that is when we reflect Christ in our lives.

Questions to Ponder

- How is God at work in you?
- How does your life reflect Christ?

Prayer

God of transformation. May the Spirit work in and through me so that how I speak, how I act, how I love reflects Christ. Amen.