**9/6 Sermon - Romans 13:8-14 “Wake Up now is the time to love”**

The imagery of waking up and meeting the dawn, in our scripture today really spoke to me this week. And not just with the earlier morning now that school is back in session, or that we’re beginning to transition through the end of summer and into the Fall.

Honestly, I feel very much like we are experiencing a great deal of darkness at this time. Just this past week we heard of yet more black lives being wrongfully taken, we watched as twin Hurricanes in the gulf barreled towards land, one hitting Lake Charles, Louisiana hard.

We continually hear of people struggling financially having been laid off during coronavirus. We know that kids have gone hungry for longer, as schools attempt to be creative in how they continue to provide multiple different services to poor families.

Our essential workers are experiencing genuine exhaustion and feelings of hopelessness. And families continue to lose loved ones, during a time when staying distant is the only safe option. Dark nights are lonely and, anger and anxiety are very real and very present.

But, friends, it is time to wake up…just like our passage today encourages. It is time to wake up, because even amidst all the uncertainly that 2020 has thrown our way, dawn will come!

I know, as many of you do, the feeling of rising early… on vacation, a camping trip or for Easter Sunday to stand in the dark…eyes fixed on the tree line, the ocean, the mountaintop or between the buildings. Expectantly waiting for that first thin sliver of light to finally show above the horizon. For that light to slowly expand. And to finally fill the sky. Representing a new day, a chance for new possibilities and possibility renewal.

The letter of Romans is where we find our passage for today, chapter 13. This correspondence, between Paul and a church he didn’t start and that he had yet to visit, has been understood by Christians for millennia to be the apostle’s greatest. Powerfully declaring the breadth and the depth of God’s gracious love through the gift of faith. Romans has repeatedly proved to be a catalyst for reform and renewal of Christian faith and life.

In it, Paul’s declares that God’s righteousness is universally needed, because all humanity is under the corrupting power of sin, and that God’s righteousness is the saving action of Jesus Christ, through which we have a glimpse of God as Sovereign Love. And it is this love that carries us into the dawning of the new day. But, let’s remind ourselves of the context.

The church in Rome was made up of folk with a variety of different backgrounds and perspectives. Jews and Gentiles, Torah-observers and non-observers, and people of different social categories. There were differences in views about what the church was to look like and act like, in a city that was at the very center of the known world. The seat of political and cultural power. And Paul seems to address questions about how they were to live in a way that was consistent with the Way of Jesus.

So, in a letter, Paul sets out the good news of Jesus Christ, in such a way that would level the playing field. They were to no longer squabble about law-observance or not. They were to trust in God’s righteousness not their own. And Paul reminded them, that to do that they were to focus on the things which united them and look to find ways their differences could help build up each other up.

Starting in chapter 13 verse 8, the NRSV opens: “Owe no one anything except to love one another.”

This language of “owing” is the language of debt. Now, debt is a phenomenon that I’ve been somewhat familiar with, perhaps you have to at one point or another. But here, Paul isn’t talking about student loans, mortgages or outstanding medical bills. Paul is returning to a topic that he has already talked about at lengths in chapters 5, 8, 9 and 12. LOVE. But it strikes me, that in chapter 13 that Paul is taking a slightly different angle on love. Here, he introduces this possibility of indebtedness if we do not love another. Did you catch it?

“Owe no one anything EXCEPT to love one another.” One commentator James Edwards, put it this way: “The other person represents God’s claim on our love.” That short sentence has rung in my head all week. “The other person represents God’s claim on MY love.”

What this means in real life is that...the person you negotiate with for the last drop of milk – is God’s claim on your love...

the person you hear on the radio grieving the loss of a family member

– that person represents God’s claim on your love.

the immigrant in a detention center at the border

– is God’s claim on your love

the person panhandling at the intersection

– is God’s claim on your love

the veteran waiting for healthcare services

– is God’s claim on your love

the person you have a run-in with at the store,

the telemarketer on the phone,

the co-worker or classmate that never mutes themselves on Zoom

– all these people represent God’s claim on our love.

Now, that’s tough! That’s really tough. And I’ve told God.

But ‘LOVE’ for Paul, is not soft. It’s not abstract, it’s not dependent on my ‘feeling like it.’ It’s not about me, at all. It’s not about MY affection towards someone, or MY willpower. The LOVE Paul is talking about is a divine desire that is fueled by divine power. I know this for a fact because I can say, “I love my wife,” “I love my family,” and even when we argue or disagree I have a deep affection, a palpable emotion, of wanting to see them flourish and grow and experience good things. But then there are other people. Where it doesn’t matter how hard I try, everything in me struggles to love them the way I love myself, my friends and my family. Even when I know that that is the right thing to do, the Christian thing to. I struggle, to love when I don’t feel like it. Which is why I know that the ‘love’ Paul is talking about comes from something that is much bigger than me.

In fact, we know this well, we know that the ‘love’ Paul is referring to, is the ‘love’ Jesus referred to. We know that the ‘neighbor’ Paul is referring to is the ‘neighbor’ that Jesus referred to. And THAT ‘love,’ IS BIG. That love is capable…and is capable of extending to people that we struggle to love, struggle to understand…That love extends waaay beyond the people we respect and agree with, to people we don’t respect and don’t like.

THAT love extends beyond social boundaries, racial and ethnic differences, categories of citizenship or religion. It extends beyond those who wish us well and tolerate us, to those who would wish us harm. We know the words from the gospel well...Jesus said in Matthew: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” (5:43-44).

So, when Paul joins the long Jewish tradition of attempting to sum up the Law of Moses in one sentence, and he chooses to quote Leviticus 19:18, “you shall love your neighbor as yourself,” (v10) just as Jesus Christ did before him,

he is saying – This is what our life’s work must be.

This is the heart and soul of the Way of Jesus.

Love one another...not because you always feel like it, and maybe even through gritted teeth. Love one another…because the God -who is calling you to wake up and enter into the new day- is Love. God is Love!

And God in the business of transforming you in love and into love, for this time and this place. Right here, in the darkness, before the sun rises, love is what is most needed.

Love is what is absent when we categorize people as illegal, as looters, as deserving of less pay, of less respect, and less opportunity. Love is absent when we continue to participate in an economy that rewards a few while discriminating against the masses. Love is absent when we deny the role *we* play in systems and institutions of racial privilege and prejudice.

That’s the tension we are feeling at this time. The tension between what we know is absent, and what we sense God is calling us into.

The saying: “it’s always darkest before the dawn,” comes from an 17th-century English Theologian, Thomas Fuller. “It’s always darkest before the dawn,” reminds us that in these dark places of tension and unease, where we feel the most lost, the most agitated, the most unsure about what to do, or what step to take…that dawn is just around the corner.

And *when* the sun begins to rise, then our actions carried out during the time of darkness, will become fully visible in the light of day…

The question will become, have our actions emulated the actions of Jesus?

Have our actions been loving? Not just towards family and friends, but towards those with whom we disagree.

Have our patterns of consumption, of work and play, of homemaking and dare I say voting, have we invested in practices and patterns of living, that are grounded in the firm belief that to “love one another” fulfills the requirements of our Maker? Or are we left indebted to others and to God? Owing them our love?

For Paul and others of his time, there was the belief that after Jesus’ death and resurrection, their Savior would return again while they were still alive. And though that didn’t happen, his words in verse 11 remain as true today as they did for his first audience in Rome: He says, “…You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep.”

I want to affirm those of you who have been sensing the gravity and weightiness of our own time. YOU KNOW WHAT TIME IT IS! That feeling that things aren’t right! Things shouldn’t be this way.

Black lives should matter as much as white lives. All people should have access to quality healthcare, a living wage, to support and shelter...Right now things are not as they should be - but “YOU know what time it is.” And you know, that the church must wake up and rise to the challenge of our day.

It is time to live into God’s call to love. It is time to figure out EXACTLY what that means in a world that is reeling from a global pandemic. It is time for the church to rise up, imitate the one we call Savior and be faithful to the difficult task of loving others in concrete, practical ways...every. single. day.

It is hard and it will continue to be hard, but you are not to AWAKE simply by our own effort. It is a divine power that stirs us awake. It is that same power that enables us to LOVE someone with whom we have exactly ZERO in common with, and to work tirelessly for their flourishing.

It is the divine love of Christ, in us that our world is crying out for. And “you know what time it is,” you feel it...even if it’s mixed with fear and distrust, with a sense of inadequacy and perhaps (if we’re honest) unwillingness.

The time that we are living in is challenging in every way, but it’s presenting us with an opportunity to wake up, to stir and face the dawn, to love in ways we have perhaps never dared to before.

“It is now the moment for you to wake from sleep, for salvation is nearer now than when we first became believers.” (v11) The dawn of a new day, and a new age is coming. We might not know when or what exactly it will look like. But, our God…the God of Israel through Moses and the prophet Micah, Christ Jesus our Savior, and the apostle Paul - have all taught us: “Love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the Law” (v.10).

This week, Ibram X. Kendi, during our final Anti-Racism Training said, that the ‘heartbeat of racism (or any evil for that matter) is denial.’ But, ‘the heartbeat of anti-racism (or any effort to love perhaps) is confession.’

And so, as we move shortly to the table of Holy Communion. Let me urge you to move with the heart of a confessor.

Admitting that we’ve often got it wrong.

That through this health crises we have become impatient and hardhearted.

That during these times of racial unrest we fail to interrogate our own biases.

That in this season of politics and policies, we are reluctant to examine our motives, or to reflect on how our opinions and assumptions affect others.

As confessors, we approach our Creator and Savior, we acknowledge that we are not God, we get things wrong, and we sometimes create barriers between ourselves and others, when God calls us to break them down and “love one another.”

Holy Communion offers us, individuals in this community together, to humbly come before God...in the spirit of confession, remembering that when Jesus sat for his final meal…it was not just those who were loyal to him that were included around the table…but Peter who would deny knowing him was there, and Judas too.

May this sacrament today, where-ever and how-ever you are celebrating it, mark this day, as a moment of awakening for you. A re-commitment to the dawn of a new day, and to the Way of Jesus, the Way of Love.

Amen.