

Of Love and Light

Romans 13:8-14
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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It's always good to take a break, but it's also good to get back into the swing of things. That's one reason I appreciate Rally Day to kick off our fall schedule to church school, fellowship, and worship. For in a way, this day serves somewhat like a family reunion for us as a community of faith. It reminds us of *our* connection.

And with all the suffering and anxiety we've witnessed over the past three weeks alone – the visual rise of white supremacy, the rescinding of DACA, Hurricane Harvey on the Texas Gulf Coast, wildfires currently in the West, a massive earthquake off the coast of Mexico, and now Hurricane Irma making landfall in Florida this very morning – we are all reminded of just how **interconnected** we really are. As people of compassion and empathy, we do indeed weep with those who are weeping, we suffer with those who are suffering.

As people of faith, what's our role in all this? As followers of the ways and teachings of Jesus, how are we called to respond? Following the lead from this morning's Epistle Reading from Romans 13, perhaps the best place to start is with the basics. It almost sounds trite, for it's certainly easier to say than it is to put into action, but **it all starts with the debt we owe every living being – that is the debt to love one another.**

The apostle Paul reminds us how crucial it is that we **work to create and live into genuine and authentic community.** For instance, undergirding any number of reasons of why we exist as a congregation lies a deep desire and a diligent striving to develop the kind of relationships between ourselves that are life-giving, affirming, encouraging, supportive, and infused with dignity, honesty, integrity and respect. But **how do we grow into these kinds of relationships?** To start, we must:

- be true to whom we are as individuals,
- risk the sharing of ourselves by trusting each other enough to be vulnerable,
- realize that as a community we are (at least on one level) responsible and accountable to one another.

That takes a lot of effort and courage. And that takes a lot of commitment. Any meaningful relationship does.

Backing up to chapter 12 in Romans, we learn that all this begins by **not being conformed to this world's values, but rather, by being transformed by the renewing of our minds so that we are aligned with God's values.** This is expanded in the passage that was very thoughtfully and inspiringly reflected upon last Sunday by elders Bert Woodall and Bobbe Hornback. If you weren't here, I encourage you to go to our church website where you can either read or listen to their reflections. In what I call Paul's "To Do" list of how to live together in true and authentic community, this list can

actually be used as a kind of measuring stick to see how well we are doing here at College Hill. The list includes such things as:

- **Let love be genuine** – as in sincere, honest, without pretense, play-acting, ulterior motives, or hypocrisy.

This genuine love, Paul instructs, is lived out in community in the following ways:

- Love one another with mutual affection – which means truly caring for the well-being of each other.
- Outdo one another in showing honor.
- Extend hospitality to strangers – by making room for them in our hearts and lives.
- Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep – in other words, have true empathy for others.
- Live in harmony with one another.
- Be humble and associate with the lowly.
- Do not claim to be wiser than you are.
- Do not repay anyone evil for evil.
- Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

From that, we now jump ahead to the second half of chapter 13, today's Epistle Reading, Paul continues with his instructions on building community. He does this by returning to perhaps his favorite subject: love. In verse 8 Paul tells us, **"Owe no one anything, except to love one another."** Or to paraphrase: If there is anything that we followers of Jesus owe to any person, it must be the debt of love. **Our love for one another must be the definitive identity marker of our Christian community!** So crucial is this gift of love that Paul goes on to state, "for one who loves another has fulfilled the law... Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law." Perhaps you've never noticed this particular description of what it means to love another. **Love, in the Greek *agape*, does no wrong to a neighbor. Love, therefore, automatically builds community.**

Notice that Paul's understanding of love has very little to do with emotion and feelings toward another. Rather, the love to which he refers has to do with our attitudes and behaviors directed towards others – our ethics put into action. **How will our neighbors know that we love them? By how we treat them!** Or as the old hymn states, "And they'll know we are Christians by our love." Also note that a neighbor, in the biblical sense, is not someone whom we pick and choose, like a friend. If there is indeed a crisis in Christianity today, I would say it's because we have forgotten that we have a debt that is owed to everyone we encounter, and that debt is to love them – not in a touchy-feely sort of way, but in a way that truly seeks their well-being, and is marked by dignity and respect.

From Paul's perspective, it's also important to note that none of this is possible without first being transformed ourselves by **recognizing that God already loves us, and that there is nothing we can do to earn that love. You ARE loved!**

And I like the second part of today's reading in that Paul puts before us a sense of urgency in our mission as Christians to love others. In his typical fashion, Paul makes an urgent appeal that we **"lay aside the works of darkness."** You may come up with

your own list, but Paul, of course, provides his own. He basically refers to those things that are destructive to ourselves and others, and especially to our relationships.

Paul continues his rich metaphorical imagery of the movement from darkness to light by saying we need to **“put on the armor of light.”** While militaristic language, armor, is bothersome and problematic to many of us, it nonetheless reminds us that **instead of fighting each other, we need to unite against a common enemy. That enemy can indeed be described, metaphorically, as “darkness”** – and can be found in such things as the **darkness of injustice, violence, ignorance, intolerance, exploitation, the darkness of addictions, prejudice, fear, greed, a thirst for revenge and retaliation, and so forth.**

Our calling, as Christians, is to fight against these destructive powers that enslave and divide people, and bring harm to ourselves and others. And let us not forget that **even with the light of God’s Sacred Presence burning bright within each of us, darkness is also present within. So yes, our journey each and every day out of darkness into light is personal as well as communal.** So as we journey forth today, remember that you and I owe a **debt to love ourselves as well as our neighbors.**

Perhaps it is this debt of love that is the true debt crisis in our day and time.

Amen.

Resources:

.Feasting on the Word - Commentary