

“Love Fulfills”

Valley Presbyterian Church – September 24, 2023

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Psalm 119:33-40

Romans 13:8-14

For family travels and vacations as a child, our family typically stayed in one hotel room which – for the five of us – consisted of two double beds and a roll-away cot. My parents slept in one of the beds and their three boys – my two brothers and I – would occupy the remaining bed and the cot. I have always been a relatively peaceful sleeper: it’s not unusual for me wake up in the morning in the same exact spot where I fell asleep the night before. My two brothers, on the other hand, were restless sleepers: kicking and throwing elbows, stealing blankets and awakening with the bed stripped of its sheets; the two of them in the same bed would have been an all-out nighttime battle. The only logical solution was to pair one tossing and turning brother in the bed with me and put the other in the roll-away. Otherwise, no-one in the family would have gotten any sleep.

The Apostle Paul, in this latter part of his 13th chapter of the Letter to the Romans, urges the Christians there to awaken from nighttime sleep, lay aside the deeds of darkness, and live in the light of the new day. The former time, the night, was characterized by bondage to powers that Paul calls “sin” and “the flesh,” The dawning day will be characterized by freedom and life “in the Spirit” and “in Christ.” And so, Paul says, “The night is far gone, the day is near.” (13:12)

How were they to do this? Paul encourages them, saying, “Owe no one anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.” (13:8) The language of obligation defined many spheres of life in ancient Rome. Citizens “owed” honor and allegiance to the Empire; to their benefactors many also owed money and obligations, servants owed service to their masters, women owed submission to men, and so on.

In the preceding verses, Paul conceded that we are obliged to pay the taxes that we owe, respect or honor to those for whom it is due. To owe nothing except love for one another serves to transform the structures inherent in the ethic of the

Roman culture. Power, wealth, and status are no longer the determinants; Christians are to live in different ways than they had known.¹

In our modern society, financial obligations continue to be an important issue. Rent and mortgages owed, credit card debt, loans to pay for higher education – these can all consume our minds and attention. To owe nothing but to love one another is to embrace the reality that we all are dependent on God’s grace for our very existence; thus, it reframes how we live in relation to one another in our daily interactions. Each of the commandments cited here – adultery and murder, theft and covetousness – are relational; loving one another – doing no wrong to our neighbor – is the fulfillment of the law.

This transition – the move from fulfilling one’s obligations to living in love – is the same one Jesus addressed in the Sermon on the Mount when he repeatedly said, “You have heard it said...but I say to you.” For example, Jesus teaches, “You have heard it 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.” (Matthew 5:43-44)

And so, Paul concludes, now is the time for us to awaken from our sleep; to live in the light of the day rather than in the darkness of the night. The time has passed from the deeds of the darkness – debauchery, quarreling, and jealousy; throwing elbows and stealing the covers – now it is time to live honorably; to put on the armor of light; to live in Christ.

My smartphone offers at least twenty different alarm options. It anticipates a variety of morning scenarios. There are low-key ring tones for those mornings when you have no particular place to be, no definitive “to do” list. They have names like *morning flower*, *over the horizon*, *rays of the sun*, *sea breeze*, and *blowing dandelion seeds*. For those other kinds of mornings, the ones that hold pressing appointments or can’t-be-late obligations, there are rousing, strident ring tones like *basic bell*, *beep*, and *beep-beep*.

Then, there are those mornings when we you have no particular plans and you can sleep late. The appropriate ring tone (or lack thereof) is *snooze*. I would imagine that snooze is the one function on our smartphones that Paul would not approve of.

¹ Kyle Fever from *WorkingPreacher.com*

Paul is adamant that the church Rome awakens from sleep; and we, as readers of this text, are exhorted to awaken from sleep with them. Paul defines sleep as the works of darkness: those habits and relationships that are fueled by selfishness, sin, self-indulgence, and the absence of discipline. A laid-back ring tone like *sea breeze* or *blowing dandelion seeds* seems inappropriate for the urgency of this wake-up call. For Paul, the urgency comes from the short period between Christ's first coming and his anticipated second. Jesus will return to execute judgment and establish God's reign and rule on earth. Paul expects this to occur very soon.

Paul's call to awaken comes to us in the context of a broad biblical theme of watchfulness. The prophet Isaiah says to his listeners, "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you." (60:1) The author of I Thessalonians writes, "You are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of darkness. So then, let us not sleep, as others, do, but let us keep awake." (5:5-6)

We might need this call to urgency as much or more than the Roman church. When many centuries have passed and this advent has still not occurred, it is easy to lose urgency. But there remains the truth that our lives are short and the needs of the world great; we have a limited time to serve Christ and therefore, need to do so with focus and haste.

The lateness of time is warrant for acting as if the day were not just dawning, but already here. Notice that we are not just to "look busy" and impress Jesus with our diligence. Paul does not use guilt or fear to motivate, but rather joy and hope. Paul says salvation, not condemnation, is nearer to us than when we became believers. In this text, the coming day is not a threat but a gift. To anticipate it is to already be changed.

We, at Valley, are blessed in this time and day to be able to work with some amazing partners in ministry and mission. From the ministry to the homeless and housing insecure at North Church to our evolving support for Homeless Hookup CLE to our partnership with the Douge River Presbyterian School in Liberia to the many different individuals and groups that we help through the Pass-It-On resale store, the members and friends of this church are making a powerful impact in a hurting world – loving our neighbors locally and internationally.

The Greek verb for "putting on" Christ is the same used to describe wearing clothes. Therefore, putting on the Lord – with compassion, mercy, and kindness –

is as public an activity as getting dressed in the morning; it bears witness to the hope that is in us. Lives that are characterized by loving one's neighbor as oneself offer testimony to a different future – where we do not just keep our heads down and quietly pay our taxes and other obligations but are willing to truly see one another and seek our neighbor's best.

The church – as Paul repeatedly reminds us – is a body made of many different parts; meaning that there are ways for each and every person to love one another by meeting the needs of others: whether preparing or delivering food, offering prayers, encouraging words, letters, or phone calls of support, contributing financially, or showing up in solidarity. There are ways to help out in the open or behind the scenes; leaders and visionaries as well as humble completers of everyday tasks. No one part of the body can say that another part is not needed.

Whatever our day may hold each morning, the love of God shown to us in Jesus serves as our ring tone. It is, as theologian Alyce McKenzie describes it, “melodic, urgent, heartbreaking, and heart-mending.”² It can see us through the things that bring us joy and the things that cause us dread – which is a good thing, a very good thing, because, as Paul points out to us, “Now is the moment to awaken from sleep, for salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers.” (13:11)

The debt of love is the only one in life that can never be fully settled. When we live our lives in community, the obligation to love one another will forever continue. Each new day, we wake up and choose what to put on – will we clothes ourselves in the deeds of darkness, or will it be the garments of love? Self-less love, love for one another, is the fulfillment of who and what we are to be as the Christian community. Love fulfills. Amen.

² Alyce McKenzie from *Patheo.com*