

14th Sunday After Pentecost
Romans 13:8-14
September 10, 2017

The Law that is Gospel

When the Apostle Paul wrote his letter to the church in Rome, he was sure that the great Judgement Day was imminent. Any time now, he believed, the Lord would return and what was known back then as the “Day of the Lord” would commence. That day, warned the prophets, would be a day of gloom and deep darkness, a day of weeping and gnashing of teeth. On that day, God would sort the sheep from the goats, the righteous from the unrighteous, and there would be heaven – or hell – to pay.

“The night is far gone,” Paul writes. **“The day is near.”**

Paul was a little off in his prediction of the Lord’s return. Two thousand years after he wrote his epistle, the church is still waiting. But if Paul’s timeline was off, his instructions remain as timely for us as for his original readers.

How do you get ready for end of the world? How do you live a Christian life as the day of Christ’s return approaches? *You do it by loving one another.*

All the commandments, Paul tells those young Christians, are summed up in this word, **“Love your neighbor as yourself . . . love is the fulfilling of the law.”**

As I write this sermon, Hurricane Irma is bearing down on Florida, and she seems to have put Tallahassee directly in her sights. Here in Tallahassee, we’re used visitors from the South, but this is one opportunity for hospitality I’d just as soon avoid.

I’m not even sure I’ll get to preach this sermon. It could be that, come Sunday morning, we’ll have to cancel worship, just like our neighbors, the Methodists, next door.

If we do cancel, it will be a shame. I love it when Michael Corzine plays the Taylor and Boody organ without benefit of electricity. Even if the lights should go out, the Presbyterians are able to make music. We just send someone up to the balcony, and get him or her pumping those foot-powered bellows up there.

Still, an advancing hurricane, much like the Yom Adonai (the Day of the Lord) helps us to focus on the fundamentals. Love, as the Christian mystics used to put it, has two feet: the love of God and the love of neighbor.

My guess is, we're going to have lots of opportunities to show love for neighbor after this visit from Sister Irma. We're already a center of hospitality for some church members and preschool staff who live in Wakulla County. Tonight a few of us will be sleeping – or at least trying to sleep – in the Education Building. Denise Birch, Chair of the Compassion and Social Justice Team, has already bought Cheerios – my favorite – for breakfast.

If you want to join us, bring a flashlight, a towel, your bedding, and a pack of Oreos. (Just kidding about that last thing. Vienna Fingers will do just as well.)

I suppose we should thank Irma for reminding us that neighbors come in all shades and sizes, and showing love for them has nothing to do with converting them to our doctrine or convincing them of the error of theirs. Irma doesn't care whether you're a Democrat or a Republican, a believer or a non-believer, a liberal or a conservative. She makes chaos, not distinctions.

I do wonder, however, if those who have been so insistent for so long that "government is the enemy" might be reconsidering their position today. Without the government to organize disaster plans and call out the National Guard, Irma would be even more successful in wreaking death and destruction. For years now, decision-makers have been attempting to "starve the beast" that is government. Now that the beast named Irma is advancing, they might want to ponder the beauty of the beast.

Love wears many hats. One of them just might read "FEMA."

Last Sunday, a couple was waiting to speak to me after worship. I'd spotted them earlier, singing the hymns and saying the prayers. They were in their 50's, I'd estimate. He was wearing a T-shirt that had seen better days. She was in a tank top. They had stashed their roller-type suitcase in the narthex. Both were sunburned and footsore.

No wonder. They had walked from Lake City to Tallahassee. That's a 3-hour drive, but a week's worth of walking. They were headed to Dothan, Alabama, which is home, but, they said, they couldn't walk another 50 yards, much less another hundred miles.

We weren't the first church they had come to for help. One church told them to try downtown. Another told them to go away. At one nearby church, an usher gave them a dollar and told them they couldn't come inside. Apparently, there's a dress code at that church and a rule about not bringing a suitcase with you into the house of the Lord.

(We all know how the Lord hates to see a suitcase dragged in his holy temple.)

Well, the three of us talked and we prayed, and we went down to the bus station to buy two tickets to Dothan Alabama, because that seemed to me the best way to fulfill the law at that moment in that set of circumstances.

You could say that was an act of charity. It felt more like obeying a commandment.

Paul mentions some of the commandments in his letter.

- You shall not commit adultery.
- You shall not murder.
- You shall not steal.
- You shall not covet.

(He doesn't mention, "You shall not allow a suitcase into my house," but perhaps that's in another Bible.)

There are any number of commandments Paul doesn't list, but they're all summed up in this one: **"Love your neighbor as yourself.** The simple fact is, **"love is the fulfilling of the law."**

Sometimes it's very hard to know how to fulfill the law of love. Most of the time, however, the problem isn't knowing what to do, it's doing it. In a few hours, we're going to get a lesson in fulfilling the law.

I'm not worried about this congregation. You'll do just fine. Keep on laying aside **"the works of darkness"** that blind you to your neighbor's need. Keep on wearing **"the armor of light"** that protects you from the self-centeredness and greed that threatens to divide this nation.

Keep on fulfilling the law of love, and Irma notwithstanding, we'll all be just fine.