

“The Way of Love”

Sermon for the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost – September 6, 2020
N. Farnham & St. John’s Episcopal Churches – The Rev. Torrence Harman
Romans 13:8-14; Psalm 140; Matthew 18:15-20

In 2018 Michael Curry, Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church in the United States issued an invitation to The Way of Love. It is described as “more than a program or curriculum, it is an intentional commitment to a way of practices. It’s a commitment to follow Jesus.” At the heart of this commitment is the idea of orienting and living into “A Jesus Shaped Life.”

Paul would love it. It is what Paul, after his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus spent the rest of his life trying to do. He promoted this Way of Jesus with almost every breath he took - preaching this Way till the day he died.

Paul loved to talk and write. We have his letters (the Epistles) to prove this. But we also have the story of his life which takes up about half of the Book of Acts. St. Francis’ quote is applicable to Paul: “Preach the Gospel (the Good News) at all times; if necessary, use words.” The idea being that how we orient and live our lives is the best preaching we can do, the best way to witness to the Gospel Way of Jesus, the Way of Love. However, St. Francis respects “words” when “necessary.” Words giving voice to the Way of Jesus, the Way of Life, the Way of Love, can be necessary, can be significant, can be required, given the “times.” Paul really understood this and was always very intentional, careful, and targeted with his words. They had to be for those times!

Paul was a passionate and powerful speaker. That passion and power propelled what he had to say, but what he said came from the very core of his being, his conviction that the Way of Christ, the Way of Love, was the Way in and to life. Paul, by his life and in his preaching was exercising the discipleship into which Christ had called him when he was awakened to Christ on the road to Damascus by the Light of Christ. He was blinded on the road to Damascus when Christ confronted him and called him into a new way of life so that out of the darkness of his old life he could be birthed into the light of new life and purpose. Perhaps his baptism when he arrived in Damascus was really a “sight” cleansing. A cleansing leading to a clarity of vision. Baptism washing away whatever was clouding or blocking the light within him, blocking the insight of how foundational love is to our deepest being – God’s love. Baptism, a cleansing of our lenses through which we view the world around us. Paul’s conversion opened his vision of his self and the world around him – opened his eyes to life lived with more Christ focused, love focused eyes. This new clarity resourced, fueled his life and purpose: to preach the Good News. That is what he was called to do; that is what he did. Because the times needed it!

Wake up! “It is now the moment to wake up!” I can almost hear the power and the urgency of Paul’s voice in our passage from Romans this morning. “Wake up to what?” the first century churches to which Paul writes may ask in return. In one of the most powerful and well known scriptural passages on the theme of love, Paul begins Chapter 13 of 1st Corinthians: “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.” (Rom 13:1). In our passage from Romans last week, the first words out of Paul’s mouth were “Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another.” (Rom. 12:9-10a) Today, we hear Paul’s words on love, again. “Owe no one anything, except to love one another.” And Paul’s mouth, like that of a prophet, speaking not his own voice, but the voice of God, quoting both Old and New Testament teachings on love: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” So, we remember Jesus’ words as he washes his disciples’ feet and shares table with them one last time before he is arrested, tried and crucified: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” (John 13:34). Love is reciprocal. Love is vital. Love is relational. Love is life-giving –for the receiver and the giver. Maybe what Jesus is saying is that love is something we have to learn. And we learn

it by experiencing how we are loved. We also learn it by practicing it, experiencing its flow within us and through us in relationship with others. How do we wake up to that reality?

Wake up! Now is the moment to wake up!” Paul’s command in the passage this morning is Christ’s command being spoken through Paul. These words are not just for the first century world and its times. They are for our times now. What are we to wake up from? Perhaps, silence. What are we to wake up from? Perhaps lethargy. What are we to wake up from? Perhaps, old ways, repetitive ways of thinking and acting that are destructive, harmful both to us and those around us. Ways that block us from each other and the One who created us. What are we to wake up from? Old patterns that are leading us away from what our real purpose is? Wherever in our lives we have been silently acquiescing to ways of life that do not evidence the Way of Love that Christ came to show us.

Jesus used the metaphor of sleep often as he offered parables on discipleship. How often the story of Jesus’ life included disciples falling asleep when they were most needed. Our bodies need sleep, of course, but we were not designed to sleep our life away. Waking up, moving, taking action, giving voice to what matters, exercising body, mind and spirit are essential to well-being. Not only our well-being, but the well-being of the world in which God has placed us and the well-being of those who “people” God’s world.

What is our wake- up call? What are we to wake up to? Paul is trying to tell us. Michael Curry is trying to tell us. Somewhere deep inside us something is trying to ground us in the truth of love. This truth calls us to “love one another.” What does that look like? How can we wake up to this? If we listen carefully to Christ, to prophetic voices, to the lives of those who have “” we can see it. The way: opening ourselves to the power of love, orienting our life to love God, love others. Love, as a way of establishing a priority of God and others and our “true” self, divinely natured, over what Richard Rohr labels the “false” self– that self that has tried to manufacture/craft/build who we are based on worldly values, not Godly ones.

Sometimes it is not easy to wake up. Sleeping does not ask anything of us. Waking up does. Especially now, in these times in which we are living. Will we pass through this time asleep or awake? And when we wake up, which life requires whether we want to or not, what is it we will do and be? Love or something else?

Here are some interesting questions to pose to our self as we wake up each morning? What is on my agenda for today? Then listen carefully to the self that poses possibilities. Which self is speaking to you, calling, or luring you to go about your day its way? Listen carefully to discern the voices. Are they channels of Christ Love or desires that are in opposition to that Love? Then choose. As you and I live that day, our lives will speak our choices.

What will your life and my life “preach” today? Will our lives show that our RSVP to Christ’s Way of Love is “Yes!” “No!”, or “Maybe - let me get back to You, Christ, after I consider my other commitments.”

May we ponder these thoughts and seek Grace in doing so

Torrence