

Pentecost 14A + September 10, 2017

Romans 13:8-14

Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit, WI

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We all have our favorite quotes. What's yours? Dr. Seuss: "Don't cry because it's over, smile because it happened." Oscar Wilde: "Be yourself; everyone else is already taken." Mae West: "You only live once, but if you do it right, once is enough." And we know who said this, right? "Winners never quit, and quitters never win." (Vince Lombardi).

There are two quotes I keep close at hand. One is on success, by Winston Churchill: "Success is going from failure to failure without loss of enthusiasm." The other is on solidarity by Martin Luther King: "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny."

That is from King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail"—which, if the canon of Scripture was ever opened for additions, should be at the top of the list. It was 1963 and King had been jailed because of the city's crackdown on nonviolent protesters. Scribbling in the margins of an edition of the local newspaper, King wrote, "I am in Birmingham because injustice is here...I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny."

This is true with hardship in any form, especially in the wake of natural disasters. I myself find it hard to sit idly by in the sparkling Wisconsin late-summer sunshine, knowing not only of the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey but also of the damage being inflicted in epic proportions by Hurricane Irma. I've read in disbelief of how the string of idyllic islands in the eastern Caribbean,

some of whom I'd barely heard of, were basically flattened, one by one. First was Barbuda, where 90% of the buildings were destroyed; then Anguilla, where not only homes but vital service centers such as police stations, hospitals, and emergency shelters were wrecked; then St. Martin, which was 95% destroyed; then the Virgin Islands, where entire tracts of land were entirely stripped of vegetation; then Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Turks and Caicos, the Bahamas, and Cuba. Some of these then had to deal with Hurricane Jose, which brought critical relief efforts to a halt. Then there was a massive earthquake in Mexico, and now Irma is on to Florida.

It is stressful to sit idly by. I have given to relief efforts. But I feel a visceral connection, as I'm sure many of you do, with people who have found themselves in the midst this destruction. We've seen photographs that we never could have imagined. One I still can see vividly was from a nursing home in Texas in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Harvey. It showed elderly residents in a large common area sitting in walkers and chairs water up to their waists. They had apparently been in that condition for several hours. Eventually they were rescued, but in the photo they seem resigned to their situation. After all, what could they do? What can I do, short of going down to help as Phyllis' granddaughter Laura is doing? What can we, members of the body of Christ, do?

In times such as these people may be tempted to question their faith. How could God let this happen? I read about one evangelical pastor who was asked this very question. His answer wasn't helpful. All he said was, "I don't know."

The real answer is, God doesn't *allow* these things to happen. They just do, as forces of nature. God is in control of the big picture of salvation, but not of specific details, not even these pretty big details. If God was in control of everything that happens on earth, we'd be living in a perfect world. Obviously, that's not the case.

What can we do? We can pray to God for all those affected, that they will receive the goods and services, and the consolation and strength, that they need to endure and rebuild. But what can we do with the solidarity we have with them, the feeling of being caught in an inescapable network of mutuality in which that their pain becomes ours?

Paul gives us an answer in our reading today from Romans 13: "Owe no one anything, except to love one another." All commandments, he goes on to say, are summed up with this one: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Here we are on another beautiful Wisconsin day. The roads are clear, our houses are dry. But if they weren't, we'd be dealing with it, just as are all those in Houston, the Caribbean islands, Mexico, and Florida who that know the present havoc is not the end of the road. We know we *could* deal with it if we had to, because of Paul's example in Philippians: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." What if we were to put this mindfulness of "dealing with it," the same sense of mission and purpose, into bringing in the kingdom of God?

The key to doing this is love. Paul pleads with us in 1 Corinthians, "Let everything you do be done in love." Love is at the heart of everything, because it is the force that created the universe. Love is why we were each born. Love is how the church came into existence. Love is why I became a pastor. None of us will never be perfect in this way like Jesus was. But if we truly open our hearts to God's love, it will flow in us and through us and overflow into the world. "My cup is overflowing."

So here in our second reading today we have Paul quoting Jesus: "Love your neighbor as yourself." What is love for one's self? It's not idolizing our own egos, but rather always seeking what is best for us, what is good and helpful for us. What is love for one's neighbor? It is engaging ourselves in the best interests of whoever crosses our path, whether we like it or not. No matter

who the Holy Spirit surprises us with on a given day, we seek what is best, what is good, what is most helpful for that person.

This isn't easy. In fact, it may be even harder than rebuilding a hurricane-destroyed home. That effort has a singleness of purpose, but we are constantly tempted to not love our neighbor as ourselves. How much easier it is to hate our enemies instead of loving them!

But this love is the thread by which our single garment of destiny is woven. God is counting on *each of us* to bring in the kingdom of love, with the true King of Love, Jesus, at the center of everything we do. Bringing in this kingdom doesn't happen by means of armies, castles, and crowns, but amid the sheer ordinariness of daily life, the kind that we encounter in all of Jesus' parables—a man who is robbed and beaten; a shepherd who loses a sheep; a father who loses a son; workers in a vineyard; a wedding banquet. Love your neighbor as yourself.

And the time to wake from sleep is now, Paul tells us. The gift of the Holy Spirit has already been given, but it has fallen asleep. Our solidarity with those who are suffering awakens our hearts to the radical work of the Holy Spirit, who is constantly molding us into the image of Jesus Christ individually and as a community. This is what being a Christian is all about—not doing good things in the world simply to be virtuous, but rather receiving and sharing God's love. Jesus says in our Gospel reading today we must go in love, not anger, to the one who has sinned against us or the relationship will be broken. In this way, we return to God in greater measure the love God showers on us. That is why we were created! In the wake of all the destruction and death we continue to read about, this is what we can do—go in peace to love and serve the Lord, and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Amen.

