

Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
10 September 2023

Romans 13:8-14

For several weeks, I have been enjoying Leesa's sermons on Romans, one of my favorite books, if not the favorite, of Scripture. She has done a phenomenal job, and today, I hope to add my own two cents to her teachings. First, let us say a few things about Romans in general. Romans is the longest of Paul's letters, written most likely around the year 57 or 58, about 25 years after the resurrection of Jesus. This is also a very different letter from his other letters for a number of reasons: He usually writes because a particular occasion dictates his necessity to write. For example, one of the churches asks his opinion on a theological matter, or he wants to encourage a young minister in his new church assignment, or he wants to warn the congregation about an opposition group he calls the Judaizers, etc. Another reason for his writing of letters is to address a problem. He has received reports of infighting, division, sexual impropriety, or some other issue he wants to address immediately. But in the case of Romans, Paul does not write on a particular occasion or to address a particular problem.

In fact, Paul had no relationship to the Church in Rome that we know of. This was not one of the churches he planted, he had never visited them, he had never written them before, and he is not addressing any specific problem for the Church. This letter is an introduction of himself to a congregation that does not know him and an articulation of the gospel. The letter does not seek to correct anything, in fact, it shows a great desire to visit the congregation, share the gospel with them in person, and spend some time with them as he plans his mission to Spain. In fact, this may be the real purpose for the letter. To introduce himself to a congregation he doesn't know, hoping that they will support his upcoming mission to Spain, and hoping he can use Rome as a base of operations for that future mission. As we know, Paul was arrested soon after this and never made it to Spain. Perhaps, if he did, we would have some instructions about adding paella and sangria to communal meals and coffee hours.

Now, let me say a few words about the structure of Romans. We could see two major sections in the letter: chapters 1–11 deal primarily with an explanation of the gospel, our need for the gospel, and the benefits those who embrace the gospel can expect. We also see the implications of the gospel for Israel. This first section of the book is theological, as Paul presents a detailed and dense teaching on the gospel of Jesus of Nazareth both for Gentiles and Jews. But then, chapter 12 begins the second section of the letter, which is composed of basic instructions and exhortations that flesh out the practical implications of the gospel in everyday life.

In the first part of the letter, Paul tells us that, (a) the gospel reveals the power of God for our salvation and righteousness, (b) we all have a need for justification before God because we are all sinners, and (c) justification is a gift from God. This is his gospel in a nutshell. Then he tells us what accepting this gospel will mean for the believer, (d) The gospel allows us to escape the consequences of sin, (e) it frees us from slavery to the Law, (f) it offers us a righteous life through the Spirit, and (g) it offers us ultimate victory over sin and death. We remember from Leesa's sermon how the second part of Romans begins, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." (Romans 12:1). The word "therefore" in this verse functions as a bridge between the first part of the book and the second.

It is as if Paul is saying, "Having said what we said about the gospel and what it does for us sinners, we all must present ourselves to God as a living sacrifice." Paul then spends the rest of his letter showing us the practical ways through which we become living sacrifices to God. So far, we have heard a number of great instructions in this second part of the letter, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds... Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought to think... Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good... Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor... Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer... Contribute to the needs of the saints... extend hospitality to strangers... Bless those who persecute you," etc. Today, we hear other teachings on how to become living sacrifices to our God, which is our spiritual worship.

Paul says, "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law." In fact, he says, all the commandments can be summarized in the following commandment, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Then Paul adds, "Love is the fulfilling of the law." It is interesting that Paul gives us one half of the command we have heard from Jesus. Jesus says, "Love God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and your neighbor as yourself." But Paul says, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Where is the Shema? Where is Deuteronomy 6:4-5? Why does Paul only give us Leviticus 19:17? For Paul love of God and love of neighbor cannot be separated, they are part of the same reality. One cannot love the creator without loving the creature. In the words of Victor Hugo, "To love another person is to see the face of God." Or as Jesus once asked, "How can you say you love God whom you don't see, if you don't love your neighbor whom you see?" For Paul, love is a practical action of the will and not a sentimental construct, wrapped in warm and fuzzy feelings. Love is active and engaged. To love is to do for the other, to care for the other, to respect the other, to see the welfare of the other as a matter of utmost concern and importance for you. When you love the other this way, you are in fact, presenting yourself as a living sacrifice acceptable to God. You are indeed worshipping God in body and mind. In Paul, there is no lack of nexus

between what we believe as Christians and how we behave as humans. To be fully human is to love as Christ loved. Completely and fully. Only when we love this way can we say that we know God. Only when we love this way can we say we love God. To love God means to love Mary, Joe, Pedro, Carlos... and this doesn't mean to have warm feelings towards them but to serve them, to pray for them, to honor them and respect their dignity, not because they believe what we believe, or love what we love, or do what we do, but because to love them as they are is to love God and to serve God.

Then Paul adds another compelling reason for this type of love. He says, "Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light..." These are some of the most beautiful words of Scripture, and, sadly, they are often stolen by politicians who say, "The night is almost done, there will be a new day when I am elected president, governor, mayor..." What Paul is saying is that all of us who live on this side of the resurrection are closer to our salvation now than when we first became believers. Paul draws a comparison between the lives of non-believers and the lives of believers. The life of darkness was characterized by slavery to sin, separation from God, a utilitarian understanding of others (where we used people as stepping stools to ascend various ladders), isolation from our communities, greed, envy, unbridled passions, etc. Our present and future lives in Christ are now characterized by adoption and inheritance as redeemed children of God.

By nature of our baptism we are redeemed children of God, saved by Christ's sacrifice for us. We are now "Children of Light." We cannot then choose to live in darkness, as though we don't know the light. We cannot choose to conform to this world to satisfy its demands, as though we are not aware of Christ. We cannot choose to love God with our hearts while hurting brothers and sisters with our speech or our Facebook posts. We cannot fill our hearts with a weak form of sentimentality as we affirm our love for Jesus, while stepping on the necks of those who don't agree with us ideologically or politically. The Gospel demands that there be nexus between what we believe and how we behave, between what we think of as important and how we spend our money, between how we choose to love God and how we choose to love cantankerous neighbors.

The tragedy of the church is when theologically educated people forget their vocation to be instruments of love and advocates of the gospel, and become ideological and political extremists in love with ideologies rather than in love with God and the people for whom Christ chose to die on a cross. When we devolve into sectarianism and partisanship, we willingly chose to go back into darkness. Remember that you were created for love. Do not let ideologies push you back into darkness. Amen!