

Quoting Tina Turner Romans 13:8-14



In light of today's sermon title,
I'm sad to say that my red leather dress
is at the cleaners
and I really didn't have the time to tease my hair
—but it is our first day back to the regular schedule
and the idea is to welcome people in,
not shock them into a place of horror.



Last week Whit read Paul's words
from Romans 12:9-21
and we heard some beautiful scripture about love;
*"Let love be genuine, hate what is evil,
hold on to what is good.
Love one another with mutual affection.
Outdo one another in showing honor.
Don't be overcome by evil
but overcome evil with good."*

Powerful for sure—don't be overcome by evil,
but overcome evil with good.
Whit told stories of times
when it would seem that evil should win
and instead love triumphed.
Paul's message today is similar
when it comes to love,

*“The commandments,
“You shall not commit adultery;
You shall not murder;
you shall not steal;
you shall not covet;
and any other commandment,
are summed up in this word,
“Love your neighbor as yourself.” (Rom. 13:9)*

Summed up, Paul says,
everything in the law is summed up
in loving your neighbor.
Do you remember what Jesus had to say
about this loving your neighbor business?

*“²⁸ One of the scribes came near
and heard them disputing with one another,
and seeing that he answered them well,
he asked Jesus,
“Which commandment is the first of all?”
²⁹ Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God,
the Lord is one;
³⁰ you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,
and with all your soul, and with all your mind,
and with all your strength.’
³¹ The second is this,
‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’
There is no other commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12:28-31)*

Love of neighbor is paramount
in the life of the Christian.
I don't know about you,
but on this point
I'd usually rate myself
as doing a pretty good job.
I generally love or am nice to people
so I think I do a pretty good
at keeping this commandment.
But what if I've been sleeping on the job?

Paul, and it is safe to say he's using Christ
as his guiding point on this,
but Paul is very clear about what our job
as Christians is,
*"⁸ Owe no one anything,
except to love one another
for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law...*

Now, we love Pumpkin Spice Latte's
and we love our children.
We love This Is Us on TV
and we love our dog.
Love is usually a way for us to express our emotion,
our affection, our loyalty to something
—and these definitions of love
usually bring **us** gratification.

To say, *I love the beach*,
means the salt water does something **in me**,
the beach air and sound of waves **fills me**
with a sense of relief and relaxation;
or if you say you love to hear
Barbara Streisand sing,
it is because it evokes a sense of joy **in you**.
But when Paul and Jesus say,
love your neighbor—
most of us wouldn't put that in the same category
as loving college football (Go Bears!).

Love has more depth according
to our Biblical witness.
When we say our job, our role, our obligation
as Christians is to love our neighbor
-we need to mean it.



I like my neighbor—but love them?
Seems a little too touchy, feely.
I'm nice to my neighbor
—*and let's keep in mind Jesus defines neighbor
as everyone we meet not just the people
that live next door to us.*

I'm cordial enough to “my neighbor” clerk
at Lowe's grocery store.
I smile at my neighborhood mail carrier.
I'll hold the door for the neighborly older man
going into the doctor's office in front of me
with his cane.

I'm sure you know this,
but things we all know
usually bear repeating;
Love is **the** central guiding point
in our lives as Christians.

No matter what verse you have tattooed
on your heart or your bicep,
scripture points to this one undeniable
starting and middle and ending point:
love.

The Biblical witness to love cannot be
constrained to only Café Rule's Chicken N' Waffles (which I do love)
or the affection I have for my spouse.
God doesn't see us with stars in the divine eyes.
God isn't all a flutter when we walk by.

God's love for us surpasses
and encompasses all of our love
and more of it than we can know.

As Christians,
love should be the first thing
that anyone notices about us.
Which means it can't be just an emotion;
love is also and primarily shown in our actions.

And seeing our love in action
needs to be a reality now more than ever.

I hope this won't surprise you,
but people aren't interested in listening to us,
even though we can preach a good sermon
or play an incredible worship song;
they aren't interested in our really wordy prayers
or our theologically sound statements on social media.

What the world is paying attention to,
is our actions—
this is why Paul tells us
"this is the moment to wake from sleep."



Actions have always spoken louder than words
but now more than ever,
the world is paying attention.
Perhaps the reason it sounds like
people are leaving the church in droves
is that they are
—and the reason is
that to most people it looks like we are asleep
when it comes to each and every one of us
acting out our love for neighbor!

Instead of seeing love
they see nominal believers in nice clothes.
We can say it,
sing it,
pray it until we are exhausted
and feeling smug that our job was well carried out,
but if we aren't actively
making love a reality for our neighbors
then we are just talking in our sleep.

After watching an interview with a prominent pastor

on Good morning America,
 who said that the real reason his church wasn't open
 for folks escaping flood waters in Houston
was because the city hadn't asked him to open up his church,
--well that, to me, sounds like you were sleeping.

Loving neighbor means that the followers of Jesus
 are all about doing good and only good
 for and with another;
 for and with everyone.

 That is the biblical witness to love,
 the decision and the action
 to put others before self.

We love to call it servant living
 or the golden rule but what it all boils down to
 is the willful account of working for the good
 of everything and everyone.

That is love.

 That is love for neighbor,
 working for everyone's good.
 Just like Paul says,
 "to put it positively,
 love does what is good to a neighbor."¹

In Paul's language,
 to be asleep or to act in the night
 is the same thing.
 It means you might say one thing
 but then act in the opposite manner.
 Or you might go to church
 but being a Christian isn't transforming your life.

 I fear this is common enough
 because the world has a name for those Christians,
 you know it...and we are accused too often
 and perhaps rightfully so of being hypocritical.
To act in a way where there are things you'd hide

¹ Eleazar S. Fernandez, *Feasting on the Word*,

—Paul says things like drunkenness
or sexually promiscuous behavior,
just to name a few,
is no way to live as a follower of Christ.

And lest we think it is only big things
like drinking too much or sleeping around,
which, thankfully I am avoiding--
Paul also includes things like being greedy
and jealous and quarreling—
Oops, well Paul, when you point those out,
I'm not as sure about my um, my own Christian behavior.

Christians are first and foremost about love,
about doing good and only good
for everyone around them
and so it is no wonder
that lots of people seem to think we
Christians have been sleeping.

Paul's advice to the Roman Christians is to wake up!
Stay alert! Focus and stay the course!
But we all know that staying awake is hard.
And even though Paul urged his church
to stay awake in relation to what he thought
would be Christ's imminent return,
we are still 2000 years later struggling to stay awake.

When violent attack after violent attack
happened to young black (mostly) men
across the country,
the Black Lives Matter movement
adopted the phrase, "Stay Woke."

STAYWOKE

It was and still is a cry to continue the struggle
for racial equality in this country,

in our communities and in our neighborhoods.

It is hard work to stay awake, to stay woke
—it is not for the faint of heart or weak of faith.
 Staying awake is hard enough
 that you actually well,
 we can't do it alone.
 We will need to dress ourselves in Christ,
 we'll need a community of saints
 to help keep us awake.

Our cloudy picture of saints
 are as folks who got it all right
 and were the best and
 most holy of Christians.
Or maybe we think, nothing more than,
 oh that's a Catholic thing.
 But saints are the people throughout history
 that realized that staying awake
 was the only hope of bearing witness
 to the coming of God's kingdom.

Saints are the folks in our churches
 who will say yes too many times
 because they understand the struggle
 to love their neighbor.
 They stay woke.
 And staying woke is the only assurance that
 our salvation is nearer everyday
 because we are living into God's will for the world.

Paul says that **love** is the fulfillment of the law
 and Jesus said he came not to abolish the law
 but to—what—fulfill it.
 So that means that what
 the gospel of John said
 is beyond true-
that God so loved the world,
 God wanted goodness to reign,
 that God sent his son,

God came down here Godself
and said we're going to make this right
and I will show you how to do it.

God in Christ Jesus is saying,

I will show you how to love your neighbor.

Eugene Peterson says that when the Word became flesh,
God moved into the neighborhood.



In the non-canonical book, The Gospel of Peter,
things are slightly different in his account
of Christ's resurrection.

In this account,

[as Christ stands at God's right hand],

a voice from heaven calls out to addresses the cross:

"Thou has preached to them that sleep."

To which the cross responds by saying, "Yes!"²

The cross preaches to us,

we that are asleep to wake up

and see what love can accomplish.

That love overcomes evil.

The cross teaches us that love,
acting for the good of creation is not easy;
the cross does not sugar coat the reality
that suffering on behalf of another is a reality.

The cross preaches to us who are asleep

that real sacrifice for our brothers and sisters

is messy and scary at times,

but part of who we are as Christians.

And in the end,

² Alyce McKenzie www.patheos.com/progressive-christian/cross-ringtone-alyce-mckenzie-09-04-2014#fkVwfcHYfWmeoLiU.99

the cross triumphantly says *yes*
because it stands with the empty tomb.
God Almighty help us, who sleep.

In William Stafford's poem, *A Ritual to Read to Each Other*, he writes,
"For it is important that awake people be awake,
or a breaking line may discourage them back to
sleep;
the signals we give — yes or no, or maybe —
should be clear: the darkness around us is deep."³



Stay woke people
because the darkness around us
is in fact deep.
Let's hold each other up
and make sure that we are doing all that we can
to be love in the world—
to make sure our neighbors
know, believe and trust
that we have only their best
in our hearts, minds and hands.
Be the saints this world needs to see,
those imperfect Christians, dressed in Christ
who are willing to stay awake,
who are willing to struggle,
because the struggle is real.
Put on Christ who says to us,
there is no greater commandment
than loving your neighbor.

³ William Stafford, "A Ritual to Read to Each Other" from *The Way It Is: New and Selected Poems*. Copyright © 1998 by William Stafford. Reprinted by permission of Graywolf Press. Source: *Indivisible: Poems for Social Justice* (Norwood House Press, 2013) <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/58264/a-ritual-to-read-to-each-other>

Stay woke.

When we are faced with decisions
about deporting hard working young people
because through no fault of their own
they were brought to this country
as babies and toddlers,
stay woke.

Parents don't take babies
on dangerous journeys across borders
or flee their homes with toddlers
unless the darkness around them is deep.

Saying to our government and community leaders
that no one deserves to be called illegal
and making sure that our country stays true
to it's promise that we are a nation
of dreamers and believers,
hard workers,
that is our great cry of love.

Preach to those who sleep.
Making sure that our neighbors
with black skin believe
that we have their back,
that we have their best interest at heart;
that their children
and brown skinned children
and every color and variety under the sun,
are every bit as important
as our white skinned children—
that is our promise that love does no wrong to neighbor.

So, what's love got to do with it? Everything, Tina, everything.