

Romans 13:8-14

⁸Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹The 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.” ¹⁰Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

¹¹Besides 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; ¹²the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; ¹³let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

The Message

⁸⁻¹⁰ Don't run up debts, except for the huge debt of love you owe each other. When you love others, you complete what the law has been after all along. The law code—don't sleep with another person's spouse, don't take someone's life, don't take what isn't yours, don't always be wanting what you don't have, and any other “don't” you can think of—finally adds up to this: Love other people as well as you do yourself. You can't go wrong when you love others. When you add up everything in the law code, the sum total is *love*.

¹¹⁻¹⁴ But make sure that you don't get so absorbed and exhausted in taking care of all your day-by-day obligations that you lose track of the time and doze off, oblivious to God. The night is about over, dawn is about to break. Be up and awake to what God is doing! God is putting the finishing touches on the salvation work he began when we first believed. We can't afford to waste a minute, must not squander these precious daylight hours in frivolity and indulgence, in sleeping around and dissipation, in bickering and grabbing everything in sight. Get out of bed and get dressed! Don't loiter and linger, waiting until the very last minute. Dress yourselves in Christ and be up and about!

Lately, there has been
a coaxing urgency
in our morning routine.
The reason for this
is mostly because for the last 3 weeks
school has been at home;
and this means I really have to get after the girls
to get in gear in the mornings.

There just isn't a lot of excitement
to get up,
eat your breakfast,
make your bed,
put on *clean* clothes,
brush your teeth
...to go sit at the dining room table
for math with mom.

In comparing notes with other mothers,
I am convinced pandemic or not;
there are two types of people out there;
those who get up with urgency
and make their beds every morning
and the rest of you.

Urgency in our house
has been relegated to the mundane
but necessary,
but not all urgency is the same.
For many along the Louisiana coast last week,
urgency meant boarding up windows,
dusting off generators,
putting sandbags along your property
and leaving
in anticipation of Hurricane Laura.

In fact, urgency is usually born
of anticipation.
Which is the case for Paul's urgency
here in Romans.

Paul's urgency has more to do
with anticipating Christ's return
than getting up and making the bed.

This Biblical urgency
has much more immediacy tied to it.
I love how The Message translation
puts the last verse of this passage,
"Get out of bed and get dressed! (*this sounds like me*)
Don't loiter and linger,
waiting until the very last minute. (*also, me*)
Dress yourselves in Christ,
and be up and about!"

Early in Paul's ministry
there was an expectation
of Christ's imminent return.
We see this in his first letter written to a church,
1 Thessalonians, the oldest book
in our New Testament.

Paul's language is urgent and persistent,
"Now brothers and sisters,
I do not want you to be unaware
or uninformed
...concerning the times and the seasons
...for you yourselves know
that the day of the Lord
will come like a thief in the night
...so, let us not fall asleep as others do..."

Can't you hear that same echo in Romans,
'Get out of bed and get dressed!
Don't loiter and linger,
waiting until the very last minute.
Dress yourselves in Christ,
and be up and about!'

Besides the urgency that is required
for parenting young children,
what does urgency look like
for you these days?
Don't we all feel an urgency
for a possible Covid vaccine?
Do you feel an urgency
around climatic change
when the storms we are having
are getting stronger
because of the rapid warming of our planet?

Do you feel an urgency
for our country
to get a handle on violence and rioting,
the misuse of deadly force by police,
so that we can continue the work of justice
for black, for brown, for white,
justice for all people?

What does urgency look like
for people of faith right now?
What kind of urgency would we feel,
if we knew Christ was coming back
on September 7, 2020?
And side note, wouldn't that just be so 2020
—for Jesus to come back this year?

There are days when I am sure
we all wish he would come down
and fix the mess we're in.

Doug Bratt, an adjunct professor
at Calvin Seminary asks,

“Would [any of us] feel any urgency
to rearrange [our] priorities
if [we] knew Christ was returning tomorrow?
Would [we, as] Christians
look at things any differently?
Would [we] treat people any differently

if [we] knew exactly
when Christ was going to come back?¹

Would urgency have us
mending our fences
and burying our hatchets;
would we tear down walls
and build bridges?
Paul's admonition is for us to stay awake,
don't fall asleep,
to pay attention to what is going on around us,
to get up and *make your bed!*
Okay maybe the last part
is just my urgency, again.

None of us of course know
when Christ is coming back.
And Paul's urgency just doesn't have
the same authoritative tone of immediacy
it once had with his early churches.
His 1st Century, Jewish apocalyptic, lens
colors his message to his congregants.

The Messianic return would set things right;
it would overthrow all empires once and for all;
it would bring the new age
that would usher in peace.
Behave as though this were it,
because this is it—Jesus is coming back
and there's no time to waste
in behavior and lifestyles
that don't mirror Christ!

One of the workout trainers at my gym, Lamar,
has a training program called,
the Time is Now—
Paul would wear Lamar's shirt for his workout,

¹ Doug Bratt, https://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/proper-18a-2/?type=lectionary_epistle

Because Paul lives in this in-between time,
this time of transition
where Christ has risen
but is expected to return soon.
So, in the meantime, he tells them,
in the meantime,
while you wait in anticipation,
be about the transforming work
that takes place in the power of Christ.

Get up and dress yourself with Christ
so that everywhere you go,
that is what people see and notice.
Whit has mentioned before
that in times of crisis,
throughout history,
Christians have often been at the front lines,
with the sick and dying,
with the poor and hungry.
In his book, *God and the Pandemic*,
N.T. Wright points out how in Acts,
when the newly formed community
of Jesus followers heard about a famine,
they didn't sit around
trying to figure out what had gone wrong.
They didn't spend time thinking,
why is this happening to us
or is this the result of our sin.
Instead, their response
was an urgent, immediate,
'How can we help
and
who from our community can we send?'²

² NT Wright, *God and the Pandemic*

For our ancestors of the faith,
urgency was expressed in immediate action;
the response to act in love
was a responsibility and an ethic.

“Don’t run up debts,
except for the huge debt of love
you owe each other.
When you love others,
you complete what the law
has been after all along.”
This could be perhaps our greatest obligation,
what Paul calls, our *debt of love*.
It may sound simple enough,
but it is truly the greatest and hardest
and most important work we will ever do.
I had a friend who gave his church in Tennessee
the same benediction every week,
‘Go out from this place loving one another
—it is all that easy and all that hard.

Putting on Christ,
clothing ourselves in him,
is as Paul puts it in his letter to the Colossians,
“to clothe ourselves in love
which binds us all together.”
This love is what defines our Christian community.
It is to be our identity marker
—people should see that decal
of the cross and colored leaves
on our cars
and be moved to love.

I hope they see us volunteering
at the Soup Kitchen and think,
I want to love like that.
We pray people see us
on the local non-profit board and think,
let’s make decisions in love.

They should see us ringing the bell
for the Salvation Army and think,
I owe everyone love.

I hope they see us at our
drive through ice cream social,
and wonder if we'll enough love to go around
I hope they see us at our factories,
our schools,
shopping for groceries
and think, what great love.

The writer Annie Dillard says,
“that day by day
you have to give the work before you
all the best stuff you have,
not saving up for later projects.
If you give freely,
there will always be more.”³

I think Paul would agree with her.
His urgency pushes that we must live each day,
willing to give the love we have
to each other and this created order,
and trust that
there will always be more love.

We have a children's book
about a dog that doubts there's enough love
for him and the new family cat.
So, he's mean to the cat
and that cat, she saves him
from being shut up in the barn
where no one would find him.
The moral of the book is,
there is always enough love
to go around.

³ Anne Lamotte, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* (Anchor Books, New York 1994) pg. 202

That's what Paul means when he says,
 "owe no one anything
 except to love one another."
 Love that isn't just sentiment.
 Love that isn't just a feeling.
 This love is an ethic for Paul,
 as old as Leviticus.

Love that becomes a way of life.
 Love that becomes the Christian lens
 to see the world.
 Love that becomes a praxis of subversion.⁴

I love the word praxis
 because it makes me feel
 empowered and smart.
 Love as praxis, means we move
 beyond theory and feeling
 into action and custom.
 Think of that,
 love as a custom
 —as in something we do
 that is expected by all of us.

Love as a praxis of subversion implies
 not just an overthrow or undermining of government
 when it strays from the love that Christ commands,
 but an overthrow and undermining
 of our often-capricious human nature
 when strays from the love Christ commands.

This love of Christ
 is a force that exposes
 our own selfish tendencies,
 our leaning towards greed,
 our current divisive mindset,
 our tightly held grasp on fear
 —this love takes all of that,

⁴ Eleazar S. Fernandez, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 2*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Eds. (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY 2011) pg. 40

and asks us to put it down.

This love asks us,
to love each other as we have loved God.
It asks us to put aside
any behavior and lifestyle
that does not promote love
because “love does what is good to a neighbor.”⁵

So maybe there is some urgency
that we can relate to.

“Get out of bed and get dressed!
Don’t loiter and linger,
waiting until the very last minute.

Dress yourselves in Christ,
and be up and about!”

It is true, Christ hasn’t returned yet.
But maybe Paul’s message
is still as strong as ever,
and as meaningful as ever.

There is no time to waste,
the world needs this love
enacted now.

Our country,
our community,
our neighborhoods,
need this love
to be as noticeable
as the FPC masks we wear on our faces.

Life is short after all.

The grass withers
and the flower fades.
The time to show this love is today.

No one knows
when Christ will come back
and set things right—
could be he is hoping
we’ll make a really good effort

⁵ ibid

at getting halfway there.

So, here is the urgency
and immediacy for us.

Look around.

Look at where we are;
the world right now
needs to see us
racking up a debt of love—

the world needs to see us
take up the obligation and duty
to love each other in what we do—

the world needs the love of Christ,
which binds us all together.

Our friends are hurting and lonely.

Our children, some of them,
are hungry because they aren't in school.

Our grandparents are dying.

Our waters are warming.

Our icebergs are melting.

Our forests are burning.

Friends, we must be about this business
of transforming love,
today, the time is now.

How can we help?

Who can we send?

In her book *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*,
Anne Lamott recounts a story
told by Jack Kornfield
of the Spirit Rock Meditation Center
in Woodacre, CA.

It is a story of urgency.

A story of anticipation.

It is a story of great,
and enormous debt of love.

It's about an eight-year-old boy
whose younger sister
was dying of leukemia.

He was told that without a blood transfusion
she would die.

His parents explained to him
that his blood was probably compatible with hers
and, if so,

he would be the blood donor.

They asked him if they could test his blood.

He said, "Sure."

They did and learned
it was a good match.

They asked if he would donate
to his sister a pint of his blood
because it could be her only chance of living.

He said he would have to think about it overnight.

The next day he went to his parents
and said he was willing
to donate the blood.

So, they took him to the hospital
where he was placed on a bed
beside his six-year-old sister.

Both of them were hooked up to IV's.

A nurse withdrew a pint of blood from the boy,
which was then eventually transferred
to his sister's IV.

The boy lay on his gurney in silence
while the blood dripped into his sister,
until the doctor came over
to see how he was doing.

Then the boy opened his eyes and asked,
“How soon until I start to die?”⁶

I can't even after that story.

Owe one another nothing but love.

Love that trusts
there is always more love
to go around.

Love other people a
as well as you do yourself;
You can't go wrong
when you love others.'

Or another way to say it,
the time is now,
get up- make your bed (!)
and be about the work of Christ;
the praxis of love.

⁶ Doug Bratt, https://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/proper-18a-2/?type=lectionary_epistle