

Waking Up to Love

Romans 13:8-14

*Owe no one anything, except to love one another...
it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep.*

Matthew 18:15-20

"If a member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault..."

This Saturday is our annual recommitment silent retreat. It is a day for those who are currently Covenant and Community Members, and those considering moving toward a commitment to membership, to be together for a day of silence, prayer, and reflection. This is our way of re-centering ourselves as persons and a community in the commitments we have made and desire to make for the coming year. Am I ready and willing to recommit myself to following the living Christ in active discipleship for another year? Am I ready and willing to be in a community of faith with intention, commitment, and a sense of both belonging and responsibility? Do I still feel called to deepen my relationship with God, with others, and with the world through loving service? These are the kinds of questions we work with during this time of recommitment.

Paul says two things in the reading from his Letter to the Romans that can set the tone for considering our recommitments. First, he lifts up the commandment of love as the core of the community of Jesus. He writes that we are to owe no one anything but to love one another. This is fulfilling the law. Love the neighbor as yourself. If we center our lives in this, we are doing all that is necessary for a full and meaningful life as persons and as a community. Who is the neighbor? Jesus told the parable about a Samaritan, considered irreligious by Jews, who surpassed the faithfulness of those who claimed to be religious. He unhesitatingly stopped to help one who was in need. The neighbor is whoever is in need, whoever is close at hand. In fact, the upshot of the parable is that "neighbor" does not have to do with the other person but me, the openness of my own heart and life to others regardless of who they are.

One of the most important purposes of the inward journey is to be aware of whatever is in us that puts up walls between ourselves and others. How can I be neighbor to others in our community here? How am I not being neighbor? What fears, jealousies, hurts, prejudices do I harbor that prevent me from regarding those near at hand as brothers or sisters in God's love? This is hard spiritual work. It asks that we pay attention to our own inner life and how it shapes our outward actions. This growing awareness of our inner life helps us toward being channels of God's love and forgiveness in every relationship, as one of our spiritual disciplines says. Are we ready to work with these hard questions, with this honest and deep looking into our own hearts and minds? It is difficult, but it is also the way we grow into a fuller, freer, more joyful life—the life into which Jesus calls us, the life of God's kingdom.

What is love? In scripture it is always more a verb than a noun. It is how we relate to others, how we act, not how we feel. We are to relate to ourselves and others as God relates to us, with compassion, mercy, respectfulness, and just dealings. It is both deep acceptance AND being held accountable for the life of discipleship. God's love for us is unconditional; it is not prevented by anything we are or do. It is steadfast love, always there for us. At the same time, God's love calls us to be the persons and the community God created us to be. We are to grow up into who we truly and deeply are.

To love in this way is to be open in each situation and relationship to what is truly loving. So love is also wisdom and discernment. It is not one way of responding in every situation to every person. Sometimes loving involves giving or receiving a warm embrace. Sometimes it means speaking or hearing difficult words of accountability. Our reading from Matthew's gospel contains Jesus' teaching about holding one another accountable. Being in community, a community of God's love as we know it in Christ, means having a willingness to be held and to hold one another accountable for the commitments we have made. This is

especially hard for us because most of us hate conflict or tension or addressing difficult situations. We confuse loving one another with ignoring hurtful behavior. Yet, that is not truly loving. A loving concern for one another brings with it the desire to help each other manifest more fully the life we are created to live. Am I willing to be held accountable for my commitment to the spiritual disciplines or practices—being a channel of love and forgiveness, giving of my material life, identifying and exercising my gifts for the community itself or the wider world, making time each day for prayer, study of scripture, and examining my own life? Am I willing to grow into the humility that comes from being part of a community, to look honestly at my own attitudes and behaviors and how they affect others?

To live by the singlemost commandment to love means we don't have to get hung up on legalism and moral obsessiveness. We are freed from the law as we live the great adventure of the life of love. It means growing in our understanding of both the unconditional and accountability aspects of love, and learning how to do that with one another. But living out the commandment of love always it means not giving up on ourselves or others. To love in this way as persons and a community bearing the name of Christ is hard work. It means paying attention. And yet it is also liberating. We drop our harsh demands of others and ourselves. We live out of God's grace.

Then Paul says a second thing--it is time to wake up from sleep. The night is already leaving; the day is at hand. Paul is using these images to speak about the life we have in Christ and the meaning of Jesus' life for us and the world. It is a new day.

Waking up is a wonderful image for the spiritual life. Every major spiritual tradition speaks of the life of faith as an awakening. It is waking up to reality—the reality of God, of ourselves and others, and the reality that love is not only the center of the community but of life itself.

When we decide to commit ourselves to a disciplined spiritual life, to practice daily the inward and outward dimensions of our life in relationship to God, we are on the road to waking up. We begin to see how we have been sleepwalking through life—preoccupied with all sorts of things that really don't matter in the long run; lost in mental and emotional attachments to the past or the future; our mind a bird's nest of worries, fears, anger, and unhealthy patterns of thinking. The spiritual life, especially what we call the inward journey, is about becoming increasingly aware of our inner life. This is not so that we can beat ourselves up about things or become perfectionists, making demands of ourselves. It is so that we can deepen our self-understanding. Then as we become more aware, in honesty, humility, and compassion for ourselves, we begin to experience this "waking up." The important thing is that the inward journey of greater awareness and deeper understanding is always undergirded and enfolded by God's unconditional love for us. It is a journey in grace.

Then Paul talks about putting off some things and putting on some things. We put off, he says, the "works of darkness" and put on the "armor of light." This is another fond image that Paul uses—taking off and putting on, like clothes. As we work with our inward journey in growing awareness and understanding, we begin to see clearly the kinds of reactions, attitudes, and behaviors that we can let go of, or lay aside, as Paul says. I find it interesting that when I become more aware of what is making me angry or fearful, simply understanding more deeply where these reactions and feelings come from, it is not so hard to begin letting them go. I discover that understanding and insight are themselves the first movement of letting go. This is practicing compassionate understanding in our own lives. When we are doing that, we find that our compassionate understanding for others grows.

Here is where this part of our reading connects with the first part. Our difficulty in loving is usually because we are living out of some unacknowledged or avoided feeling we have, some fear or anger or insecurity that really has to do with our own inner life rather than the other person. We tend to project those inner conditions onto others, making them into enemies, perceiving them as somehow a threat to something. But when we practice the inward journey as a way of growing in self-understanding, awareness, and self-acceptance, we find that our hearts become more open. We create

an accepting and loving space for others because we have been expanding the space within ourselves, undoing the knots that have been tied in us because of past experiences and our reactions to them, and the patterns of thinking and feeling that have been established in us.

I was asked a very interesting and greatly important question this week. Is the Church of the Covenant community committed to reconciliation? That is, are we committed to working things through in honesty and caring, instead of falling into duplicity and hostility? To me, this has to do with what Paul says about “living honorably as in the day.” Now, most of us don’t engage in “reveling and drunkenness” or “debauchery and licentiousness”. Yet the bit about “quarreling and jealousy” is closer to home. Every group, every community of human beings discovers pretty quickly how easily we fall into ego-centered conflicts and tensions that arise from our own woundedness. No one is free of this, and we need to give up the illusion that one day we will find a community that does not experience these things. The difference is that we CAN be a community that desires and intends to work with and work through conflicts and tensions and disappointments in ways that express and manifest the love Paul is talking about, the love that is to be the core of the community of Jesus. How did I answer this question about our community? Yes, we do try to work through these things when they arise. I don’t know that we always do a good job at it. It is something we struggle with. But because we do commit ourselves to this inward journey of love as individuals and as a community, we ENDEAVOR to be channels of God’s love and forgiveness in every relationship. As long as we work with it, as long as we are indeed endeavoring, then we are at least making it possible for God to make us a community of reconciliation.

Does this make any sense to you? I think if you work with it, you find that it does make sense. In the end, it is not about anyone else but ourselves and whether or not we are on that spiritual journey, that way of waking up to the life of God’s love as we receive and know it in Jesus. This is why the Christian spiritual life is not at all easy. It asks of us a commitment, a willingness to look at ourselves, to first of all take responsibility for ourselves as persons made for and called to the life of love. We have to do it for ourselves, but we don’t have to, nor can we do it alone. We do it in community.