

Good morning! It's so good to be together again. It's so good to have you here. I want to begin this "school year" by commending you for being in church. Last week, both my wife Astrid and I were away from church. We both said how we can see that it would be so easy after a busy week to do something other than worship on Sunday morning. But know this, Beloved, The one who honors God with one's presence, God will honor in countless other ways.

In case you happened to miss this past Thursday's Forward Day by Day, I thought it was a powerful statement regarding making the effort to come to church each Sunday. It's very brief and I would like to share it with you. It was based on the Scripture passage from John chapter 9, which reads,

John 9:14 "Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened [the blind man's] eyes." The person commenting on this passage for this past Thursday writes the following,

"Jesus gives sight to a man blind from birth. His disciples want to know if the man was born blind because of the sins of his parents or his own sins. The Pharisees want to focus on Jesus' violation of the sabbath. Jesus says, "I am the light of the world."

I read this story and think about how many times Jesus has opened my eyes on the sabbath day. So often I go to church on Sunday completely distracted by worry or the busyness of the day or week ahead. Sometimes I am burdened by sorrow. Sometimes I go out of habit or obligation and sit completely unengaged, listening to the scriptures and the prayers but hearing none of it. And then the miracle happens. It is the tiniest of miracles—the words of a hymn will speak to me in a special way, saying exactly what I need to hear; a familiar prayer will call me back to faith-filled attention; at the peace a friend will bless me with a smile or hug or words of encouragement—but it is enough to open my eyes and restore my spiritual sight. I give thanks to the Light of

the world who heals me on the sabbath and every other day.”
(Forward Day by Day, 9/4/14.)

So, you are a blessing to me and others when you come to worship. And hopefully, each time you are here you will receive God’s blessing in some way. Just show up and it will come. What does God have for you and for me here today in worship? It will be exciting to find out.

I was reminded over this past year at a preaching workshop how helpful it is for us as a community of faith to hear from the Epistle readings. The reason this is is because these letters were written to communities of faith like us about dealing with the challenges of living our faith in everyday life. Therefore, they speak to very directly about our faith in the here and now.

That said, let’s take a listen to St. Paul’s counsel to the Romans.

It is easily broken in three parts for us: The first part is the call to love as the basis for our faith. Don’t you just love it when an explanation of living the faith is simplified? The KISS method of keeping it simple is always a good thing.

Explaining how to live the faith does not get any simpler than the first line of this reading from Romans for this morning. “Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.” (REPEAT) I remember a memory verse from my 4 or 5 year old Sunday School class as a child. This is one place the memory verse could have been taken from. It was three words, “Love one another.” Those three words will take us a long way down any spiritual path, including our Christian one.

St. Paul goes on to remind us that all of the commandments are summed up in this idea of loving one another. He sums it up by

saying, “Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the Law.”

Jesus summed up living by God’s Law by saying, “You shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart, and with all of your soul, and with all of your mind. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself. All of the Law and the teaching of the prophets is based on these.”

St. Augustine once said, “Love God and do as you please,” which is clever way of summing up the love of God and the love of neighbor together.

So, that is the first point St. Paul is making, “Owe no one anything but to love one another.” The next question that arises from that command is, “Why should one do this? Why is it so important love your neighbor as yourself?”

St. Paul, being the logical thinker and great communicator that he is, addresses the why in his second point.

He alludes to the end of the age, what we mean when we say, “Christ will come again”. He points out to them that they are nearer to his second coming than when they first believed. Though Paul seemed to think that Christ’s Second Coming was imminent in his day and time, the same thought is true for us as we await Christ’s Second Coming at the end of the age. That event is nearer to us as time passes than when we first believed as well.

What Paul is getting at is the importance of bearing witness to Jesus in our lives as we are nearer the end of the age than we once were. It is about taking our place as what he refers to in

another place as the New Israel. Remember that when God called Abraham, God told Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation, meaning the first people of Israel, the Jews, and through them all the nations would be blessed.

Therefore, the same should be true of us as well. Again, WHY should we be so intent on loving one another, in fact, loving all people as ourselves? As the new Israel, we are called to be a blessing to everyone around us and eventually that must spread to all the nations of the earth. But, of course that starts with each of us loving those around us and with us binding together as a community of Grace Church to make a larger impact than we could as individuals.

There was an old hymn or Christian song that gives voice to this idea. I remember it said something like, “Let others see Jesus in you. Let others see Jesus in you. Keep telling the story. Be faithful and true. Let others see Jesus in you.” The way others see Jesus in us is by our love, right?

Remember that old adage as we go forth in Christ’s Name each day, “They won’t care what you know (about God, that is) until they know that you care (about them, that is). Others will only know that we care if we love them. (PERIOD)

So, we’ve looked at the first point, involving WHAT we must do, and that is to love one another and so fulfill the Law of God.

Next, we looked at WHY “WHY is it so important that we go about loving one another?” The why is, that as we see the end of the age approaching, we are on this “mission to love” to be a blessing

to those around us, that they will see and be drawn to Christ in us, and as God's New Israel, eventually for this blessing to spread to all nations, that all nations are drawn to God's love through Christ as we have been.

This brings us to the third and hardest of the three, "HOW to love others as ourselves?" How on earth do we do this? I heard a simple and compelling explanation of this from a priest colleague, about 30 years ago, Chuck Murphy, who was at the time the Rector of All Saints, Pawleys Island. I'll never forget it.

He said that if we are not careful, we will think that the Christian life is about trying harder. In this case, where loving others is concerned, we will be tempted to believe that the way that we love others is to suck it up, and try harder to love those around us, and if we'll just try harder, we will be successful.

Chuck pointed out to us that this is absolutely contrary to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We don't live the Christian life by trying harder. We live the Christian life by surrendering to Jesus and being transformed by Him and His Holy Spirit.

Maybe you have noticed that trying harder to be a better person or a better "Christian" if you will, has not worked all that well. I've noticed this for myself.

Beloved, it is when we surrender ourselves to this Christ, and invite Him into the driver's seat of our lives, that we begin to see our lives change. Why? Because we can't transform our lives. If we could, we wouldn't need a Savior and Lord. But we can't, so we do need Him to come and rescue us from ourselves, basically, from our selfish human nature that makes us into a counterfeit human being, sometimes called the false self.

The false self is the one that runs all of the emotional programs which promise happiness and don't deliver. For example, if I'm

just educated enough, and successful enough financially, and good looking enough and smart enough and popular enough and powerful enough, and if I can just stay ahead of the rest of the pack, I will be happy.

By contrast, the true self, the one God created you to be, comes to God, who made you in the first place, and asks your Creator who you are. And the Creator says, you are my precious child, and as I am love, you are called to be love. And by the way, I sent my Son Jesus to show you what that looks like. And not only that, I am filling you with His Holy Spirit to empower you to live this life of love. So, Beloved Child, follow Jesus and you will find the wholeness that I desire for you. You will find out what it truly means to be a human being, like Jesus, your Savior, your Lord, your brother and your friend. Surrender to this abundant life I have for you, and will find the fullness of joy that I have for you.

St. Paul puts it this way in our Epistle for today, “For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers. (Here he is again referring to the Second Coming of Jesus). He goes on, “the night is far gone, the day is near. And here it comes, notice that it says nothing about trying harder. Rather Paul writes, “Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness (which is sexual promiscuity), not in quarreling and jealousy.

Now, finally, Beloved, Paul is going to tell us HOW to avoid all of these things, and how to live a life of love for one another, and notice again that what he is about to say to us is the GOSPEL, and it is NOT about trying harder. Rather, Paul writes, “Instead put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.”

Put on the Lord Jesus Christ. That does not mean trying harder. It means to embrace Christ, to surrender to Him, to ask for His help

this day and every day, and eventually what will happen is that we will be more and more transformed into His likeness, not by our own efforts, by His power working in us. The result will be that we will be more and more our true self, the one God created us to be, and less and less the false self which is trapped in its own selfish pursuits.

The upshot of it all will be two things, 1. We will find the fullness of joy that Jesus promises us. 2. Others will indeed begin to see His life lived out in ours as we learn from Him and are empowered by Him to love one another.

It is an exciting journey and one that we don't want to miss by thinking that living and loving for God is about trying harder. Rather it is about continuously inviting Jesus the Christ to transform us into His image and likeness.

Lord give us the grace to see this truth clearly and to be remade in your image that we might be YOUR love in this world. AMEN.