

**Rev. Dr. David Holyan**  
**“Love Your Neighbor As Yourself”**  
**First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**  
**Sunday, September 6, 2020**

**Matthew 18:15-20**

*If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.'*

**Romans 13:8-14**

*Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. 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 neighbour as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.*

*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 armour of light; let us live honourably as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.*

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imagination, our faith, our life to you and to the mysterious workings of your spirit. May that spirit do its work now among each of us. May it take all that we offer in song and prayer, in word read, in word proclaimed and transform it into your words, your peace, your truth, your comfort, your challenge but your word. So that as your people, we can be fed and nourished this day. We can be reminded that you abide with us and walk before us, behind us, and to either side of us. And most importantly Lord, you walk within us. So, help us draw strength and courage in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

I have to be honest that today feels like I'm preaching at my own funeral in a way. I think next week it will be a week, for me at least on Sunday, a celebration of thankfulness, of gratitude, a reflection on all that we've shared together. But this week feels a little bit different. This week feels a bit heavier to me. I don't know about the others here in worship today, but even the feeling of sitting here in this space today feels a little bit different. And it feels

especially different, especially heavier if you will, because you're all out there somewhere. We're not together during this time where I wish for nothing more than to be together. So, I come with this sense to the writing that Paul offered to those that believe in Rome. And I come at it remembering something that I learned in college at Seattle University when I changed my major from pre-med to religious studies. And one of the first courses that I took, which was sort of an introduction to theology course, the author of one of the textbooks kept talking about how the Christian life is the cruciform life. That in a sense our lives are meant to be shaped into the work and ministry of Jesus Christ and especially for the Roman Catholic tradition that work that Christ does upon the cross for all of us. So, in a sense our lives are supposed to be shaped by the cross. I remember thinking then, and not only then, but many times since then, "Why on earth would the Christian faith ground itself in the death of Jesus Christ?" Of all the things that we can hold dear about the mission and ministry of Christ, the faithfulness of God in Christ, the power of the spirit at work through Christ, it seems for me that one of the hardest things to wrap my head and heart around, is the death of Christ. But somehow, that plays a central role, informing us as brothers and sisters in Christ. And obviously, this recollection was brought forth this week as I really, really stopped and slowed down and considered what it means to me to resign as your pastor. I went all the way to look up the etymology of the word resign, and it means to give up, surrender, abandon, or submit. When I read about give up and surrender and abandon, the image that came to me was of someone in a corner of a boxing ring, literally throwing in the towel saying, "Okay, enough. Let's stop. We've got to get out of the ring before too much damage is done."

And then I remembered something that the associate pastor of my home church said to me as I was beginning to awaken to the possibility of going into ministry and dedicating my life to serving the church and serving the people of God. He warned me to find any other job. To do anything other than ministry because ministry, in his words, was brutal. As he explained it to me, he said you walk around with a projector screen on your front, bull's eye on your back, and you as a person seem to stop existing in a lot of people's eyes. They'll be nice to you when they're in front of you. They'll throw darts at you when they're behind you, and so please pick anything else. But if you can't, shake the call of God then embrace it fully.

I remember getting back in the car after that conversation, making my way home, and thinking to myself, what on earth was he talking about? How could a holy calling from God Almighty be that difficult at times? That much struggle. Thankfully, I was naive enough to trust that that calling from God would prevail and it has. And it has carried me and I'm sure Karen and everyone else who's dedicated their lives in the service of the church through some really brutal times in ministry and in life. Because having faith in God, as all of us know, does not protect us from the vicissitudes of life. The ups, the downs, the highs, the lows, the lefts, the rights, the obvious challenges that are coming that we see, and the blindside that we don't. Faith does not stop those things, faith carries us through those things. And as much as I despise the poem or the saying, "I looked back on the sand and there was only one pair of footprints and those were the footprints of Jesus because he carried me", there is some truth to that. But I think that there might be two sets of footprints. At least one of them walking and maybe two lines where someone's feet were dragged as Jesus carried you through the challenge that you faced.

I think about the phone call this week with John and Edie Hale as they shared the depth of hurt and loss over the death of their son. I could imagine Jesus with an apron tied around his waist wanting to make meals for them and provide a cup of coffee. To fluff a pillow, to make sure the bathwater was just the right temperature, to love and care for them in the midst of their hurting because this is the depth of God's love for us when we are hurting, when we are troubled, when we are confused, when we are angry, and when we are lamenting. Jesus, by the power of the

spirit, is right there with us, even when we want Jesus to protect us and that doesn't happen. But Jesus companions us through.

As the psalmist reminds us of those dark shadowy days in the valley, today, for me, feels like one of those days where there is deep gratitude and supreme frustration. The gratitude that I have is for the calling that God has placed upon my life. And the frustration I have is because that call needs to come to an end here in this place at this time and maybe forever. That is to be determined. And the reason that I bring all of this up obviously is because I've always wanted to preach and be honest to you. But in the passage that we have from Romans, Paul talks about clothing ourselves in the armour of light. The what? The armor of light, not the serving apron of the light, not the valentine card of the light, not the happy let's-go-on-vacation, lie-on-the-beach clothing of light but the armor of light. In a sense, Paul lifts up and invites us to take on the ultimate oxymoron, the armor of light. And in that oxymoron, Paul acknowledges if we're able to see it, the polarities that we as brothers and sisters of the faith experience all the time on this side of heaven, great faith, great disappointment, great faith, catastrophic brokenheartedness, great faith, unbelievable cruelty, great faith, the need to protest and stand against oppression, racism, socio-economic injustice, whatever it is that we need to stand against, we do so trusting in the opposite pole of great faith.

When actions of protesters are seen as somehow unpatriotic or anti-police or anti-American, there's an eruption of potential violence or there's tension that is seemingly insurmountable. People cast that in a light that seems to be dismissive of the possibility that those people could be people of great faith: great faith in God, great faith in America, great faith in democracy, great faith in freedom. And so, as Paul suggests, they and us need to be clothed in the armor of light because it's not easy standing up against the powers that try to suppress or judge or punish us. And it's not easy to stand up against or with or in acknowledgment of the need at times to give up, surrender, or abandon, or to resign.

In a sense, Paul acknowledges that what is unbelievably difficult and requires armor is at the same time undeniably a holy thing of light. And in this little phrase of only three words, Paul lays before us the essence of being a Christian in today's world. We are called to be holy. Life can be at times unbelievably difficult. And then I remembered something that happened back in 2005. As part of my doctorate of ministry studies and Christian spirituality, I read a book by Chris Glaser entitled, *Coming Out as Sacrament*. And in it, he describes the process that he and so many like him have undertaken as gay men in our society, the difficult decision and process of coming out as who they are. And his argument in that book was that coming out was sacramental. That something that was unbelievably difficult was at the same time and within that difficulty, holy, blessed, touched, and ordained by God. As a way for people to see through the veneer of what we see on the surface into that inner part which is of God, which is holy, which is sanctified. And I feel for myself, in finally acknowledging how much I hurt, in finally hearing the message that so many others have been telling me for years, I feel that somehow I am in the midst of this coming out. It's not a pleasant process. It is unbelievably difficult. And yet, it is my hope and my prayer that it is holy. Our passage from Romans is one of those classic passages because Paul says, "Love your neighbor as yourself", essentially repeating what Christ says in the Gospels. And our passage in Romans is framed beginning at the 12th chapter and ending at the 15th chapter. It's part of a long section of Paul's letter. This section begins in chapter 12 with these words, "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. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the

renewing of your mind so that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect”, or I think better translated, complete. Paul is advising or encouraging the Romans to give their lives over to God as a living sacrifice. To allow their minds and their hearts to be shaped by the promises of God and not the demands of the world. And to use discernment to figure out, "Okay. What is God's will for us? What is good? What is acceptable? What is complete?" He sets up the first part of that framing and then goes on and offers us the profound message to love your neighbor as yourself. And then at the end of this section in Romans, in classic Paul style, he sort of offers a blessing or a strong encouragement. "May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, and in accordance with Jesus Christ, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." And then a few verses later, "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." So, we've got God and Father, Jesus Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit blessing and filling and enjoining everyone into the promising love of God.

So, in the midst of trying to offer ourselves as a living sacrifice and knowing that we're blessed and loved and supported by God, Paul says, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Unbelievably difficult and yet very holy work. And I don't know why these things come to me, but it was not too many days ago, maybe even been yesterday, as I was thinking about all this and what it means to resign and to resign during COVID and to not be able to stand back in the chancel and shake your hands and hug you and get kisses especially from you Annie Littlepage

I remembered something that happened at my prior church. I remember when a gentleman came to my study and asked me to be with him as he told his wife that he was gay. He told me a little bit about the story, his sense of where he was at in his life, what he wanted to do, how he wanted to be able to love himself enough to be honest and love his wife enough to be honest. So, I did that. And then I met with her separately. And I can promise you it was unbelievably difficult. This man who had been married for decades had three kids was a very successful attorney, finally found the courage to embrace who he was, and how he wanted to live his life. And he came out. I looked him up and I found out he is no longer an attorney but now a judge on the Superior Court bench in King County. His work was holy and difficult.

And so, we get to the crux of this message. As difficult as these last couple of weeks have been, I pray to God that they are also holy. That me finally owning how much my abilities have been diminished because of the pain finally owning that I need to lay aside my call to serve you as your pastor, my realizing that I needed to take the energy that I had and focus it on myself right now. I pray to God that all of that is holy work. And that that holy work will continue through this process. Not only for me but for Karen and Bill and all of the staff for all of you, I pray to God that this moment in our life together and in the days, weeks, months, and years to come will continue to be holy work. At times it may be unbelievably difficult. But it will also be holy. Amen.