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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 18)
September 6, 2020

Lectionary Year A: Romans 13:8-14

When looking at today's Second Reading from Romans, one may wonder, as with any of the apostle Paul's writings, what prompted the sentiments and appeals contained therein. Obviously, the things mentioned must've been issues, otherwise Paul wouldn't have bothered bringing them up! The first section is quite obvious: "Love one another." In following the Commandments -- especially the ones dealing with how you treat your neighbors -- you show love and, might I add, respect for your neighbor. I might argue that this is Paul showing the Romans one of the ways by which Christian community is built. Love one another, and you're off to a good start.

But what about the second section? Well, this seems quite challenging, if not provocative. Paul writes, "Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy" (Romans 13:12b-13).

If we think of Paul as the one who upholds the good news of salvation by grace through faith, then what is with this morally harsh admonition? Basically, he's saying, "Don't drink [too much], don't party, and don't fight." Quite honestly, if Paul had his way, the sorts of celebrations to which a lot of folks are accustomed in the Midwest would be shut down!

Taken in context, Paul might also have the general Roman populace in mind as he wrote; the Romans have long been portrayed as revelers, as prodigious drinkers, and as indulgers in the pleasures of the flesh. Thus, one could argue that Paul

is holding Christians to a higher standard. Put in terms that are safe for children of the Reformation of the sixteenth century, it would be something along the lines of "because you have been saved by grace through faith, your personal morals should reflect this great gift you've been given."

But then we have to figure out what Paul means by what he says; it's not as if we can walk right up to him and ask him what he means. No, we have to use our noggins a bit and come up with a reasonable application of his teaching. So let's bring this into our everyday reality with a scenario that we've probably experienced ourselves.

It's Friday night, and we want to go to Spike's (no, I'm not a paid endorser); we're going to visit with our friends, have some drinks, and listen to our favorite band from Warsaw, Indiana. Would this be a "work of darkness"? Would this be "reveling and drunkenness"? Would this be "debauchery and licentiousness"?

I'm guessing that my strict Swedish Lutheran ancestors would curse me for saying this, but I'd have to answer "no" to all of the above questions. Much as they might disagree, we're not talking about a drunken orgy here! However, if you find yourself often veering into things you'll regret the next morning, there may be a bigger problem at hand, and it may not be something the apostle Paul can help you on. A twelve-step program, for example, might be a better place for you to look...

Moreover, someone in that latter category wouldn't be someone with whom you'd want to moralize; no, that person might actually be of a stronger moral fiber than you. Too often, well-meaning (but misguided) people have attributed such problems to moral or religious deficiency, and nothing could be more destructive.

So if Paul is talking about orgies, binge-drinking, and the mayhem that follows,

what is the takeaway for (presumably) the majority of us? One virtually indisputable fact is that Paul drank wine himself; actually, due to there being no reliable refrigeration in the ancient world, it was impossible to prevent fermentation of grapes, which meant that there had to have been wine back then...and plenty of it! I realize that "everything in moderation" is not in the Bible, but, reading between the lines, this seems to be what Paul is suggesting. Partaking of the fruit of the vine does not necessarily lead to drunkenness and debauchery. If it does, you might have a bigger problem on your hands, as I mentioned earlier.

Put in a more general context, Paul's thoughts and admonitions point to (no surprise) things that either build up -- or destroy -- communities. If everybody's drinking and fighting all the time, what good will be accomplished? Granted, the Christian life isn't all about us doing good, but, on the other hand, being a child of God doesn't entitle us to a free-for-all! The building-up of communities depends precisely on the things that Paul lifts up in the first half of our reading -- love, obedience to the commandments, and the fulfillment of the law (fulfillment of which is through, of course, love).

But there are things that can disorder that love. One can be selfish. One can indulge solely in one's own pleasures. One can do things that are destructive to one's neighbors. And while some might consider Paul to be a prude for what he writes at the end of Romans, chapter 13, I would beg to differ. Far from being prudish, he is upholding common sense. You could reduce it all to a simple statement: Don't behave like idiots, because you are loved and have been forgiven by God.

Indeed, the good news of Jesus Christ calls all of us to live, to love our neighbor, and to serve God's creation in a manner that reflects that good news. Thus, it is a given that love is the fulfillment of the law. You love because love --

properly ordered -- extends first to God (who calls us to love him) and then to neighbor. That is the only law if you were to boil the Christian faith down to its essence. And God, being the first to love us, demands only love in return.

Simple as this may sound, it's quite difficult to put into practice. We can go so far as to follow all the "rules" right. "Don't drink and raise hell"...well, that's the easy part, actually. Even something like "love God and go to church" seems within our reach. But then look at the world around you. Is it easy to love that neighbor who squanders his or her public assistance dollars on booze? Is it easy to love that neighbor who, in your mind, doesn't deserve the lifestyle he or she enjoys? Is it easy to love that neighbor who smells bad, looks different from you, or doesn't "work" for a living?

Along with reveling, drunkenness, debauchery, and all that other fun stuff, Paul talks, too, about quarreling and jealousy. Those aren't good things, either. And when it comes to loving one's neighbor, they can really drive a wedge between people. You see, the folks who we are driven to despise -- the squanderer of public assistance dollars, the person undeserving of the lifestyle, the smelly, the different, and the idle -- are those whom we are commanded to love. We have no other option, here! So I'd say we'd better figure out what the implications of our Lord's command are. What will it mean when such a person asks us for help? What will it mean when such a person wants to share a seat with us in church? What will it mean when we go to the voting booth to elect people to serve neighbors whom we might not like?

Big questions...but returning to Paul's sentiments and appeals, we can be reminded of the things that both build up and destroy communities. And surely our Lord will lead us to those things that build up. As Paul says, "Put on the armor of light." Put on Christ, who has raised you to new life...new life that drives us

out of our sinful ways, and into the properly ordered love of God, neighbor, and self.

Amen.