



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Asheville, North Carolina
6 September 2020
Sermon: Put on the Lord Jesus
Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

Romans 13:8-14

Romans 13:8-14 - New Revised Standard Version

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 neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; 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 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. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

“Put on the Lord Jesus” like you lace up your shoes in the morning for a walk, perhaps the only time you will leave the house today. “Put on the Lord Jesus Christ,” like you drape your favorite sweater over your neck when you feel a cool morning breeze, making you wonder, ‘what will this winter bring?’ Put him on, like you turn on a laptop, if you’re privileged enough to have one, so your child can ‘go’ to school this week. Put him on, like you wrap your mask around your

face before heading to the store to pick up that forgotten gallon of milk. “Put on the Lord Jesus Christ,” “for salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near.” Paul didn’t know when salvation would come, but it felt close. Therefore, do not fall asleep. Live a life of love.

How different his words sound today, on Labor Day weekend of 2020, than the last time they were offered by our lectionary! Paul’s words take on new meaning for us in a time of coronavirus. There’s a certain pull I feel, a temptation – I wonder if you feel it too, in the heaviness of today – to dream of another time. This week, I think it was around 2:00 one morning, I was rocking our daughter back to sleep. She just started at a daycare facility in town. My partner started back seeing patients. Our chances of catching the coronavirus had suddenly increased exponentially overnight. We can catch it, be harmed by it, give it to our children, or give it to someone in a vulnerable population, and it could kill them. So, as I often find myself doing, as a young father, rocking my child to sleep, I found myself worrying. Rocking and worrying.

And a comforting image came to my mind. One day, I’ll take a vaccine for this illness. I fantasized, in my mind, getting the injection. I wondered, would I weep when I got it? When I stopped being a possible carrier of an illness that could harm or kill the people I love? I was tempted to stay there, in that comforting image of getting a shot in a doctor’s office, and weeping on the table. A comforting

fantasy – a dream of relief – when in fact there was no reprieve in sight. When in fact, that very dream, we learned this week, might be politicized and weaponized right before the coming election.

How have you fantasized about the end of the pandemic? What dreams help you escape? Paul's words take on a new meaning this summer: "You know what time it is," he calls to us, from across the millennia. "Wake from sleep...Put on the Lord Jesus Christ." In other words, don't forget that God calls us today, here and now. The Revised English Translation renders verse 11 in this way, "Always remember that this is the hour of crisis."¹

Paul knows the temptation to flee hardship, to dream of a better time, to escape. This is why he has spent the last two chapters before our lectern laying out in detail the aspects of love. At the beginning of the passage, the love he talks about as the fulfillment of the law is not some facile kumbaya; it is the difficult work of a community seeking to be the body of Christ in the midst of the crushing oppression of empire and colonialization in the First Century. "Let love be genuine, he says. "Hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor." "Be transformed by the renewing of your minds." "Owe no one anything, except to love one another." "Put on the Lord Jesus," so that your community sees Christ in you. And do it,

¹ For details on the differing translations, see Leander Kirk, *Romans* (Nashville: Abingdon Press), 330.

“Always remember[ing] that this is the hour of crisis.” This is a passage about living this moment, this very moment, in all the hardship that it entails, as the body of Christ - Not to lose the moment in fantasy.

“America is not a racist country,” declared Nikki Haley, former governor of South Carolina and ambassador to the United Nations, last week at the RNC, while standing behind a wall of American flags. She went on to talk poignantly about growing up the child of Indian immigrants who struggled so that their daughter could have the opportunities she has had. Haley also spoke powerfully about the tragedy that brought her to the national stage. “Our state came face to face with evil,” she said. “A white supremacist walked into Mother Emmanuel Church during Bible study. Twelve African Americans pulled up a chair and prayed with him for an hour. Then he began to shoot. After that horrific tragedy, we didn’t turn against each other. We came together, black and white, democrat and republican,” she continued. “Together we made the hard choices needed to heal. And removed a divisive symbol peacefully and respectfully.” The divisive symbol that Haley talks about, but curiously she did not name once in her speech, is the confederate flag, that flew at the South Carolina state house until 2015, a hundred and fifty years after the defeat of the confederacy in the Civil War. Her telling of the story omits and overlooks much of the struggle of that time and today. In fact, it illustrates a temptation in our current moment to talk about the racial divisions and injustices of

our country as if they were the result of a series of bad apples, misunderstandings, and over-reactions that can be overcome by simply coming together across our differences. This too, is a fantasy. This too, is an escape.

Here is a key moment Haley's speech left out, as she employed the aftermath of the Charleston massacre at Mother Emmanuel to claim that America is not a racist country:

[Bree Newsome video]²

Bree Newsome was arrested on the charge of defacing monuments on capitol grounds, a charge that could have led to three years in prison. A month after her arrest, spurred on by her protest and that national outcry it catalyzed, the South Carolina government permanently removed the symbol of the confederacy. It was a key moment of defiance and bravery, in the face a racist history personified by a state house flag.

I am struck, rewatching Newsome's fateful climb up the State House flagpole, by her recitation of scripture. In fact, she wraps herself in scripture. "The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life. Of whom shall I be afraid" The words of Psalm 27, as she climbed

² <https://youtu.be/NmasFGBSIUM?t=2508>. Footage utilized from Post and Courier, "Bree Newsome removes the Confederate battle flag from Statehouse in 2015." YouTube. Feb. 22, 2017. <https://youtu.be/iIUfHV2sBNg>. I should note, I was influenced by comedian John Oliver's commentary on Haley's speech in LastWeekTonight, "RNC 2020 & Kenosha: Last Week Tonight with John Oliver (HBO)." YouTube. Aug. 31, 2020. <https://youtu.be/rBu0BRTx2x8>.

down, knowing she is about to be arrested. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still water.” She recited Psalm 23, as she was led away in handcuffs. Taking down that flag was an act of faith, trusting in God and putting her very self on the line, not knowing the outcome. “Put on the Lord Jesus Christ,” words said by Paul, words embodied by Bree Newsome. “You know what time it is.” Now is not the time to look for oversimplified answers to centuries of racial oppression in this country. Now is not the time to reduce systems and institutions of privilege and domination into folksy misunderstandings and trite campaign slogans, as if we could end injustice if we just stopped talking about race and racism.

Paul’s message to us is that we aren’t just supposed to love when it is easy, when it is convenient. No, he says, when life is heavy, when the future is uncertain, that’s when God calls us to the life of love. Many of us would rather escape that call. There is a temptation, especially in middle class white dominant institutions, to look for easy answers to the protests in the streets, to fantasize about a quick cure to the virus invading our homes, to dream about one side or the other winning the next election as if it would solve all that ails us. I’ll confess my desire for such fantasies, because they are an escape from the hard work that God is calling us to right now, in this moment.

My first sermon after the lockdown was on Palm Sunday, about six months ago. I talked about how an internet meme of Chris Farley hugging everyone in a crowded studio audience had pulled at my heart. Farley is living into his larger than life persona, hugging and giving high fives all around to a cheering audience. And the meme line said, “This will be every pastor the first day after the lockdown.” It’s funny; I still get chocked up thinking about it. Half a year later, that longing is still there. It is real; it is palpable.

But Grace Covenant, it is a mistake to long for that moment while missing the one that is before us now. The church is not holding its breath until we can gather again safely in our sanctuary.³ At this very moment, we *are* the church gathered, the church called together by God and connected by the Spirit. Wherever you are watching this service, beside loved ones or alone, on a couch or in a car, in Asheville or overseas, this morning or tonight, you are part of the worshipping community of Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church. We are the Body of Christ, knit together not by brick and mortar but by the Spirit that knows no boundaries as it connects us, and calls us, and challenges us to put on Christ today. That same Spirit calls us to love, not in an empty, feel good way that forgets the time we are in, but to love by doing hard, Spirit filled work in the midst of uncertainty and

³ I am indebted to my pastoral colleague Rev. Samantha Gonzalez-Block for voicing this sentiment during a recent session meeting.

hardship, in the midst difficult conversations and urgent reckonings with our past, in the midst of being the church dispersed.

So put on the Lord Jesus Christ, as we continue to worship live over youtube, as we prepare for a palooza kick-off that will be unlike any before, as we delve into the Me and White Supremacy groups over zoom. Put him on, as we learn what it means to love each other and be the Body of Christ in a time of great peril and opportunity, a mournful and desperate time but also a grace-filled time. Grace Covenant, you know what time it is. "Salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers. The night is far gone. The day is near. Put on the Lord Jesus Christ." His Spirit calls to you in this very moment to be his Body, loose in this world. Thanks be to God.