

Rappahannock Christian Church – 9/4/11

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Communion Meditation

I guess I haven't mentioned yet that this is Labor Day Weekend. It's a weekend when we give thanks and celebrate the abilities that we have to make a contribution and a living.

Most people aspire to do something significant in life. They want to build something. Maybe they want to literally build a house or a factory, or produce a work of art. Maybe they just want to build a name for themselves, to be remembered fondly, or with respect. Of course, we also want our labor to earn us a living.

This makes me think about Christ and His work on the cross. What He did is really quite different, isn't it? Christ did not come to build a monument to Himself. His work was self-less. It was sacrificial. He did what He did for us, and it cost Him His life.

This is what we celebrate when we come to this Table. These Elements remind us that He didn't suffer for Himself. Rather, He suffered and died for our sins, so that we could have eternal life. Here in Matthew we are told:

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body."

Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." – Matthew 26:26-29

Just One Debt

This morning our Scripture comes from Romans 13. We're still following the common Lectionary, as we have been doing for most of this year. This is the passage for this Labor Day Weekend.

Romans 13:8-14 – Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not covet," and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.

In this passage, the Apostle Paul mentions armor. He's talking about a struggle, a battle.

I heard on the news that General Petraeus, who had been in command of the coalition forces in the Iraq and Afghan wars, has been appointed to be the head of the CIA. This man has become renowned for his ability as a brilliant military strategist.

Paul is a sort of strategist, also. He understands that the Christian life can be a personal struggle. But it is also part of a great cosmic struggle between good and evil, God and Satan. There is not a lot of room for waffling, indecision and inaction.

Sometimes we perceive the struggle as outward. It is "us vs. them," a struggle between believers and non-believers. This can sometimes be true, of course, especially in other lands where people are not free to worship as they please. It was true in Paul's day, because Christians suffered at the hands of both the Jews and the Romans.

But what Paul seems to be saying here in Romans 13 is that the bigger part of our struggle is inward. The challenge is to make godly choices every day, and not the ungodly ones that are the norm in our culture. Sin's temptations are many, and they are great!

Let's look more closely at the passage.

In the earlier part of the chapter Paul has said that we should be obedient to the governing authorities. Pay what you owe, he says, whether it be taxes or revenue or respect or honor. In the second half of the chapter he begins with a kind of play on words: "Let no debt be outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another."

This makes me pause for a moment. It may sound as if Paul is contradicting Jesus here. He isn't. But it might, at first glance, sound like he is. After all, when Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan it was to let his followers know that "love your neighbor" was NOT restricted to fellow Jews. Saved sinners need to show to everyone the mercy they have received at God's hands!

Paul would not disagree. After all, he says over in Galatians 6, "As you have opportunity, *show good to all people*, especially to those who belong to the family of believers." So, there is no contradiction here. It's just that, at this moment, Paul is emphasizing how important it is that Christians show their love for one another.

You may know that in Greek there are three different words for "love." While in English we use the same word for "I love my wife" as "I love pizza," in Greek they have different words that connote different levels or types of love. One word that they have is meant to convey, "I will love you *if* you...do some thing for me." A second word means, "I love you *because*...you have done thus and so." The third type of love is the love that God shows. It is a sacrificial love. This word means, "I love you *in spite* of the fact that you are not deserving and that you haven't done anything for me." That is the kind of love Paul says we are to have for one another in Christ.

And, Paul says that, if you have that kind of sacrificial love, you will live your life in obedience to the commandments. You will not murder. You will not steal or commit adultery. If you have this kind of love, obedience to the law will take care of itself.

Paul says, however, that to love one another this way is not optional. It is urgent and vital. He issues such a stern warning here! "It's time for you to wake up! Our Salvation is nearer now than when we first believed." In other words, the time of our Lord's appearing is closer than you may think. You don't know when Christ will return. What do you want to be found doing when that happens? Don't put off doing what God wants you to do. Don't think that you have plenty of time. Don't say, "You know, I just can't get along with Charlie. He did me wrong, and I hate him. Maybe someday, a long time from now, these wounds will heal and I'll be able to forgive him and treat him nicely again." Where is the urgency in THAT?!! Today is the day! Now is the time! You don't know how much time you've got! This is urgent! We're in battle! The soldier can't say, "Well, you know sir, I just don't feel like 'moving out' right now."

Paul insists that Christians aren't supposed to go around doing the kinds of things people generally do in the darkness, where no one can see. ("Not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy.") After hurricane Irene, you probably know what it is like to live in the dark, right?! But Christians are supposed to distinguish themselves as honorable. We live in the light. Our very lives are the most compelling argument anyone can give to prove that Christ's presence and power are real! Our actions speak loudly!

This is not complicated. Neither is it *easy*. It is a high calling to which we have been called in Christ. We live to please the Lord. We live to support, strengthen and encourage our fellow believers, and God may use the character of our lives to penetrate the defenses of unbelievers who have ignored Christ's call, or have avoided looking honestly at themselves and their need for God's forgiveness.

Paul says that we are to be urgent. To be used of God, not for our own sakes only, but especially for the sake of others.

Benediction

"The Lord bless you and keep you: The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you: The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace." – Numbers 6:24-26