

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost/September 6, 2020

Call to Worship/Psalm 146 (NRSV)

Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord, O my soul!

I will praise the Lord as long as I live;

I will sing praises to my God all my life long.

Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help.

When their breath departs, they return to the earth;

on that very day their plans perish.

Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,

whose hope is in the Lord their God,

who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them;

who keeps faith forever;

who executes justice for the oppressed;

who gives food to the hungry.

The Lord sets the prisoners free;

the Lord opens the eyes of the blind.

The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down;

the Lord loves the righteous.

The Lord watches over the strangers;

he upholds the orphan and the widow,

but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

The Lord will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the Lord!

Opening Prayer

Gracious God, Lord of all creation,

we come to worship you and glorify your holy name.

In these moments, anoint our thoughts, our words, and our prayers

with the healing balm of your Spirit.

Help us to focus on your desires for our lives, our community, and our world.

Immerse us in your divine love and light so that others

will be drawn to the forgiveness and grace that only you can offer.

Renew our strength for today and give us courage to face tomorrow,

knowing that you never abandon or forsake

those whom you have created in your image.

Be with us now and let the blessings of this moment lead us

to be ever more faithful in our commitment to follow the ways of Jesus,

in whose strong name we pray. Amen.

Scripture Lesson/Romans 13:8-14 (NRSV)

⁸Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹The 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.” ¹⁰Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

¹¹Besides 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; ¹²the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; ¹³let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Message/A Great Awakening

In news stories and on social media during this time of COVID-19, we’ve often been reminded of the 1918 Influenza Pandemic, which was perhaps the second deadliest disease outbreak in human history. Though that pandemic lasted just fifteen months, 500 million people worldwide fell sick and it killed between 3-5% of the world’s population. The sheer magnitude of that influenza epidemic dwarfs a smaller epidemic that happened about the same time—a disease called encephalitis lethargica that affected nearly five million people, a third of whom died in its early stages. Often called the “sleepy sickness,” many of those who survived the first stages of this disease would never return to their pre-illness selves. British Neurologist Oliver Sacks, who worked with eighty of these survivors in the chronic care facility at Beth Abraham Hospital in Bronx, New York described his patients with this debilitating disease in this way:

They would be conscious and aware – yet not fully awake; they would sit motionless and speechless all day in their chairs, totally lacking energy, impetus, initiative, motive, appetite, affect or desire; they registered what went on about them without active attention, and with profound indifference. They neither conveyed nor felt the feeling of life; they were as insubstantial as ghosts, and as passive as zombies.

In 1969, levodopa (L-dopa), an early ancestor of what we now called dopamine, was hailed as a miracle drug that would cure parkinsonism. As a disease in the parkinsonian family, Dr. Sacks began to use L-dopa with his patients to treat their encephalitis lethargica with astounding results. As he shares in his 1972 book *Awakenings*, it was as if some of the patients had been in some sort of sleep for decades. Imagine falling asleep in the era of jazz music, flappers, and silent films and waking to a world that has begun to explore space, television the new medium of choice, cars with luxury features, clothes made out of man-made textiles... These “sleepy” patients were suddenly awakened from decades of stupor and inertia. For patients such as Miriam, who developed her parkinsonism at the age of 12, L-dopa was a miracle drug that released her from physical immobility at the age of 49.

L-dopa had dramatically different effects between patients and within the same patient. Leonard, when started on levodopa, returned to a happiness he “had not felt for thirty years.”

Yet six weeks later he developed exaggerated sensitivity to the drug and even with tiny doses had uncontrollable side effects. Even when the drug was prescribed carefully for some patients it was more of a nightmare rather than a fairytale awakening.

Dr. Sacks learned that, for many patients, psychological, environmental, and emotional factors seemed to have a profound effect on the efficacy of levodopa. Miron, for example, initially had an excellent response, but then became violently unstable. However, when he resumed work at a cobbler's workshop, a job he had done back in the 1920's prior to his illness, his mood stabilized; he became cheerful and continued to do well while taking L-dopa. Even when the responses to the drug were positive, patients were not always able to cope with the consequences. Rose had been struck by the disease at the age of 21 and awoke in 1969 to find her world of 1926 had vanished. She remained rooted in the 1920s and, as if the time gap was beyond her comprehension, stopped responding to L-dopa.

In *Awakenings*, Dr. Sacks talks with great humanity and a deep sense of concern for all his patients. He makes clear that treating them required far more than giving them a new drug. Although L-dopa was not always successful, the long-term relationship Sacks developed with his patients was of crucial importance. He knew each of his patients and most of their family members by first name, greeting them with smiles and hugs, cheering them on when they would re-learn how to walk again or even just simply be able to sit up straight.

There is something about falling asleep and suddenly awakening in a new place or world or era that seems fascinating to the human imagination. Certainly, we all remember reading the delightful American short story by Washington Irving—*Rip van Winkle*. Rip, a lazy, hen-pecked husband goes hunting with his dog Wolf, and falls asleep in the Catskills while King George the Third still ruled over the thirteen colonies only to awaken twenty years later to find that many of his friends had been killed in the American Revolution and that George Washington was the president of the newly formed United States. He isn't very saddened to learn about the death of his overbearing wife and taken into the home of his daughter to live out his remaining years.

There is also a wonderful legend that circulated in the centuries following the birth of the Church movement about the *Seven Sleepers of Ephesus*, a story that had a lasting popularity in all Christendom and in Islam during the Middle Ages. According to the story, during the persecution of Christians in 250 AD, under the Roman emperor Decius, seven Christian soldiers hid in a cave near their hometown of Ephesus in order to keep from being forced to offer pagan sacrifices. The story shares that, upon learning where these seven Christians were hiding, Decius orders the entrance to the cave to be sealed. The Seven inside fall into a miraculous deep sleep. Then, during the reign (408–450 CE) of the Eastern Roman emperor Theodosius II two hundred years later, the cave was reopened, and the Sleepers awoke—this time to an empire that had embraced Christianity as their state religion. The emperor was greatly moved by their miraculous presence and by their faithful witness to the church doctrine of the resurrection of Christ. Having explained the profound meaning of their experience, the Seven died, whereupon Theodosius ordered their remains to be richly enshrined, and he absolved all bishops who had been persecuted for believing in the Resurrection.

In our text for this morning, the apostle Paul offers a wake-up call to the Christians in the church in Rome: "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..." But even before sounding this clarion call, Paul tells us the reason for our need to wake up, something that can be summed up in one word, "love." Mother Teresa prophetically observed: "The biggest disease today is more spiritual than physical. It's not leprosy or tuberculosis, but rather the feeling of being unwanted, uncared for, and deserted by everybody. The greatest evil is the lack of love and charity, the terrible indifference toward one's neighbor who lives at the roadside assaulted by exploitation, corruption, poverty and disease."

Physical illness is bad enough. The lack of love is a darkness that leads to death. Life without love is impossible. The hip hop group, *The Black-Eyed Peas* capture these haunting feelings in their song *Where is the Love?*

People killin', people dyin'
 Children hurt and you hear them cryin'
 Can you practice what you preach?
 Or would you turn the other cheek?

Father, Father, Father help us
 Send some guidance from above
 'Cause people got me, got me questionin'
 Where is the love (Love).

When Christians are at their best, when we keep the main thing the main thing, when we wake up from our sleepy stupor of apathy, when we engage the world creatively and emerge from our cocoon of inertia—the trap of doing things the way we've always done them—only then can we meet the world's "biggest disease" with what early Church father Tertullian called our "distinctive sign." This distinctive sign being love.

According to Jewish rabbinic tradition, there are 613 commandments in the Torah. Jesus, Paul, James, and John all say that when we love our neighbor, we fulfill the entire law. In our reading for this morning, Paul compares love to a debt that we can never fully repay. It's one of six texts that link our claim to love God with evidence that we love our neighbor. Paul writes: "Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law." The entire Old Testament law, says Paul, "may be summed up in this one rule: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" Writing to the Galatians, Paul said, "The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" Love, said Paul in 1 Corinthians 13, is the greatest gift, without which I'm just whistling in the dark.

James 2:8 repeats this message almost verbatim: "If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, 'Love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing right."

And then there's the First Epistle of John: "If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother" (1 John 4:20–21).

Loving your neighbor, Jesus said, is the greatest commandment. In his last words to his disciples, Jesus called this a new commandment. "Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. All people will know that you are my disciples if you love one another." God's redemption of the world is mediated through the love of God's people. Now, it's not obvious in what sense Jesus's commandment is "new." It's actually an ancient commandment that goes back 3,000 years to the founding of the Hebrew community: "Love your neighbor as yourself," says Leviticus 19:18.

Just as this ancient commandment was repeated throughout the New Testament, it was repeated in the centuries after the first believers. "Our care for the derelict and our active love," writes the Tertullian, "have become our distinctive sign... See, they say, how they love one another and how ready they are to die for each other."

In this moment of COVID-19, we may be feeling strains and stresses that we've never felt before. In this time of division and unrest, we wonder if somehow the foundations of our nation are unraveling. In this era of melting ice caps, hurricanes and tsunamis, fires and floods, it seems as if creation itself is pushing back at our selfish and reckless use of its limited resources. The time is ripe for a revolution of love, a great awakening if you will, to the love that God has given us in Jesus Christ, a love that draws us closer to God, the ground zero of our existence, and closer to one another as a community seeking the common good. The divine wake-up call tells us that our calling isn't to decide who is deserving of our love. God has already done that by creating each of us, every human being, in God's image and teaching us that no one is beyond the reach of God's grace revealed in the self-giving love of Jesus Christ. Perhaps, like those patients who had endured the "sleepy sickness" for decades, we need to finally awaken to God's dream and, like Jesus told the paralytic who was lowered down by his four friends through the roof, "arise, take up your mat, and walk" so that we may release others from their paralysis of sin, death, and decay through the love and light of God shining through us.

The late chaplain of Yale University, William Sloan Coffin observed how students at Yale "thought *cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am) was what it was all about." Coffin suggested a subversive counterproposal: "I felt very deeply that it's *amo ergo sum* (I love, therefore I am)." This Latin phrase might be translated slightly differently to make the point more radical: "I am because I love." Or as Wendell Berry put it, I only live to the extent that I love.

In his book of poetry called *Leavings* (2012), Berry points the way for us in a short poem-prayer:

I know that I have life only insofar as I have love.

I have no love except it come from Thee.

Help me, please, to carry this candle against the wind.

Prayer of Intercession

Loving and merciful God,
just as you rescued the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt,
setting them free to worship and serve you,
so you have also rescued us,
setting us free from slavery to sin and selfishness,
and inviting us into relationship with you and one another.

We praise you for the love and mercy you have shown toward us.

You call us to love and serve you
by loving and serving our brothers and sisters, near and far;
to put their needs and interests ahead of our own,
and so to fulfill your law of love.

And so we offer our prayers for the world you created,
We pray for those who do not have what they need in order to survive;
those without enough food and water, medical care, shelter, or security.

Open our hearts to see the needs of our world,
and to respond with your love.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for those who are living with serious illness or injury,
who face each day with uncertainty or pain,
who find themselves wondering what the future holds.

Open our hearts to see the needs of those around us,
and to respond with your love.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

On this Labor Day weekend,
we remember those who have no work,
who are struggling to provide for their families,
and who despair of ever finding employment again.

Open our hearts to see the needs of the unemployed,
and to respond with your love.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We also pray for your church, the Body of Christ on earth.
We pray that we would be a living example of your love in our world,
treating one another with compassion and respect,
settling differences with love and integrity,
bound together by our common allegiance to you.

Open our hearts to see one another,
and to respond with your love.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We praise you for the way of love modeled for us by Jesus Christ.

Open our hearts and lives to your ongoing presence among us,
so that we would grow in faithfulness and love,
and bring honor to your name.

As we now pray as one family and with one voice these words Jesus taught:

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Closing Thought

Seventh century monk Maximos the Confessor:

"Blessed is the one who can love all people equally, always thinking good of everyone."

Commission & Benediction

Go out in love, reconciled to one another in Christ.

Lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.

Live honorably, fulfilling the law through love for all.

And may God awaken you to the blessings bursting forth all around us;

may Christ Jesus be your comfort and guide along life's way;

and may the Holy Spirit heal our relationships with one another

so that the law of love might become our witness to the world.

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. Amen.