

Love as We Wait

Psalm 149
Romans 13:9-14

Sinwon Racop tells of a time when she grew a little angry with God. She had been praying for a particular thing to happen. And praying. And praying. The particular thing did not happen. One day, she prayed, "God, I don't think you are listening to me!" And, she swears this is true, at that very moment a cricket nearby started chirping.

Waiting makes up a surprisingly large part of life. As children we must wait for our parents to get ready before we can leave the house. Should we be blessed to have children, one day we have to wait for them to visit us. Throughout our lives we must wait for holidays and birthdays, for promotions, for change in people we love and worry about. Many of the things for which we wait never arrive. We ask, but the crickets chirp. So the question becomes, how shall we wait? What should we do, or not do, as we wait? Our passage today from Romans counsels us to wait with love.

"Besides, you know what hour it is," writes the Apostle Paul. His readers understood what he meant; do we? He follows with, "...salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed." This refers to the return of Christ. Paul believed that Christ's first advent, his birth into this world, set in motion a chain of events that would accomplish the salvation of all those who were "in Christ". The fulfillment, the

conclusion of this process would come with Christ's second Advent, his promised return to this world. Paul, like many early Christians, expected the return of Jesus at any moment. Thus they felt a powerful sense of urgency to spread the Good News before it grew too late. They wanted as many people as possible to share in the salvation they believed would belong to those who believed in Jesus as Lord and Savior before he returned to prove his divine power.

Those Christians were waiting for Jesus to appear and **soon**. Have you ever noticed how much more precious time becomes when we learn we have less of it than we thought? Think of two teens enjoying a summer romantic fling. With the resumption of school they must separate. How much does each moment mean to them? Or think of an elderly person whose children and grandchildren live away. How does every second of every precious visit feel?

Paul the Apostle apparently believed Jesus would return at virtually any second. This belief gave him the motivation to evangelize tirelessly. To this day Christians who expect Jesus to return any day tend to focus on getting everybody into the lifeboat before it's too late. But here in Romans Paul only implicitly refers to using the short time left to convert as many as possible to following Jesus. He focuses instead on acting out the love of Christ. He would certainly have seen bringing people to Christ as a loving thing—the most loving thing of all. But in the text he lands instead on, “The commandments...are summed up in this sentence, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'” Paul is on solid ground here; Jesus said the same.

As we await the return of Jesus the call upon us remains to love our neighbors as ourselves. What does that mean here and now? To begin with, a little Presbyterian evangelism is in order. True, “Presbyterian evangelism” may seem like an oxymoron of the highest magnitude—right up there with “airline food”—but we have the Gospel and we have the ability to share it. The Good News is that in Christ there is no black or white. The Good News is that in Christ all children of God enjoy the same place at the table. The Good News is that Jesus spoke prophetically to every issue facing us today. Indeed, if we do not evangelize in this way others are not likely to take up the slack. And we need not climb up on a soapbox and scream at people to get across our message. No, we need only invite them to worship or study with us, to hear our understanding of God's purposes. You know people who would benefit from hearing this Gospel. Pray for words and pray for opportunity, then invite them to worship and to serve with us when God opens that door.

A second way to love our neighbors is, with the Holy Spirit's help, to discipline ourselves to behave as Paul outlines in our verses. He quotes, of course, from the Ten Commandments but we understand he uses them to stand for all God's laws. Not only must we not commit adultery, we must honor our spouses, families and friends with faithful love. Not only must we not steal, we must protect the property, the feelings and the reputation of all persons. Not only must we not covet, we must take joy in the possessions of others, in their physical, emotional and especially spiritual health and wealth. This is how we love our neighbors here and now. And when by the grace of God we do, the contrast with the behaviors of so many in these conflicted

times becomes a dazzling witness to the truth and the love of Christ.

Our Mission Committee is investigating a program by which Central Presbyterian could make these words concrete. The Presbyterian Church (USA) offers its churches the opportunity to become “Matthew 25 congregations”. The name refers to the chapter in which Jesus tells his parable of the condemned goats who refused to serve the last and least, and the saved sheep who chose to serve these downtrodden children of God. We already feed, welcome, clothe and visit; becoming a Matthew 25 church would mean increasing and intensifying our efforts. It would mean making the love of God real for people who must struggle to believe in a loving God at all. It would mean doing Presbyterian evangelism of the highest order.

I hope we follow the specific guidance offered for becoming a Matthew 25 church. It would incarnate the love of Christ through us as together we await his return—and the salvation his return promises to bring. It would help us to wait in love. It would shine the light of Christ into the darkest parts of our nation and our town. But you need not wait for us to get our handy dandy Matthew 25 designation. You might mentor a child through Kids Hope, or support the Manna from 7 food distributions on Fridays, or listen to a person of color speak of his or her grief, or just hand a coat to a shivering person. As you wait for Jesus, ask him to show you how you might reflect his love onto others. Then, take action. Love as you wait.