

The Roman lesson stands out strong. Paul expounds on the theme of "love." Love as the fulfilment of the Law. He is repeating the words of Jesus: *...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. This may seem "old hat" for you, and as I heard one colleague say, "I am tired of preaching love to a bunch of folks that never get it." That may be just the point—speaking love is pretty easy, living it is another story. How can we challenge the Church to "love our neighbor"

Romans 13:8-14

13:8 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.

- The Gospel for this Sunday is Jesus' instruction on how to deal with those who have wronged us—sinned against us. This is a very specific procedure that I have rarely found to be followed in a congregation—1) deal with the one that offends you, one to one; 2) if that doesn't work, ask one or two witnesses to assist you in the process; 3) If that doesn't work, go to the church and bring up the offense; 4) If the offender still does not listen, then let them be as an outsider to the congregation. It has been my experience that most people never deal with their offender one on one, until long after they have spoken to four or five others, brought it before the church, and then gotten deep into the process of shunning him/her. I may exaggerate some, but am I far from the truth, in your experience? Jesus offers a practical approach for dealing with conflict and Christian discipline in a congregation, the problem being, most of us are not mature enough in the faith to carry it out. The fact is, living a Christian life within a community of faith is not easy and demands some maturity out of us.

Matthew 18:15-20

"If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Sermon: **Time for a new beginning!** (This month shall mark for you the beginning of months)

Here we are at the beginning of what has become the *de facto* beginning of Church life for most Christian Communities – September! Not Advent 1 or January 1st or any other recognizable marker... simply September. And what September says to most people inside and outside the church is simply this: “It’s time to get back to work.” School, groups, societies, Session, Sunday School all start up sometime this month. The early service will soon be cack along with the circle of prayer and then the lecture series and the gatherings and... and all of them will have a new focus and a new purpose and hopefully new members and new direction. One of my favourite quotes is about beginnings and new beginning and I’m certain you will hear it from me more than once. Chaim Potok in his novel, *‘In the Beginning’* opens with this thought: “All beginnings are hard...Teaching the way I do is particularly hard, for I touch the raw nerves of faith, the beginning of things... I say to them what was said to me, ‘Be patient. You are learning a new way... All beginnings are hard.’”

Do you want to hear about ‘hard’ new beginnings?

In the biblical context presented to us this morning, Israel has been languishing in slavery for 400 hundred years and that’s long enough to languish! It’s time to get on the move... they need a starting date and God gives them one: “This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. Tell the whole congregation of Israel...” Time for a new beginning! And it wasn’t easy to convince the whole people that the dream was real, that the promised land was more than a myth, that the power of the Pharaoh wasn’t absolute, that a bunch of slaves of the greatest empire on earth could literally take up all their possessions and walk away – just because God told them to, and that all of this was part of the purpose and the plan of God for them since the very beginning of the salvation story at the dawn of history. That’s a hard beginning!

It’s time to tell the whole congregation of the Presbyterian Church of St. David that we’ve entered the month of new beginnings and its time to get down to work.

Part of getting down to business is putting the past in order. Jesus had to set some firm guidelines for those who were in conflict in our passage from Matthew 18 – this was directed to any who allowed the past to destroy the possibilities of the future... what Jesus says in so many words is: “Deal with it.” If there are things that need to be resolved in the community and congregation before we can move on, then deal with it – go see that person, connect with those in conflict, deal with it and move on... and the promise attached to this is that Jesus will be right there among us as we get on with it... where the two or three come together in the name of (and in the spirit of) Jesus and look to the good of one another and seek the good of the community and congregation. It’s time to set aside individual concerns and concentrate on what is good for the church and the people of God in this place.

Often, it’s the only way to achieve a new beginning.

Paul is pretty blunt this morning and doesn’t leave much room for interpretation. Paul simply says there is one and only one criteria to mark a new beginning – love. “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 neighbour as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.” If we can’t find love within ourselves for the sisters and brothers of this congregation, if we can’t find love for the community around this congregation, then we are hopelessly bound to a dead past. All we really need is love.

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Israel had a purpose and a promise to guide them into their new beginning – it was the promise of a land flowing with milk and honey – a land from which God’s plan would unfold and they would become a light to the entire world. And we are invited to be such a light to our world in 21st century downtown Halifax... and the plan is taking shape around us and it is time to move on, getting down to the business at hand and being everything God would have us be.

Israel commemorated this new beginning in the Passover festival – God took the initiative to get the people moving and every time the Passover was celebrated, it marked a new beginning for the people and a promise that God would guide them on the journey ahead. Now... we have many ideas about what the future will look like and how God's plan and purpose and promise will pan out but the best laid plans of mice and men gang aft agley... Israel saw this new beginning as a four month journey across the wilderness to the waiting Promised Land... never expecting a 40 year struggle to put away the past in order to embrace the future... but that is often necessary for those who are determined to have a new beginning. We will continue to explore the possibilities for the church and community at this time of new beginnings and follow through on the careful plans that have been promoted over the last 3-4 years. Often it is simply hard work and determination and looking after details and all the rest, but it is all necessary to take us to the place of God's purpose.

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Sometimes a hoped-for new beginning is derailed for one reason or another. The poet James Russell Lowell long ago said: "Once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide." And that moment often passes by those who are not ready for the journey. Paul told us this morning: "you know what time it is..." And Paul meant that we know where we stand in accordance with God's plan and purpose and if we fail to grasp the God-given moment then all our plans so carefully made are doomed or as Shakespeare put it: "all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and in miseries." But Shakespeare and Paul have words of promise for us: Shakespeare said "On such a full sea are we now afloat; And we must take the current when it serves, Or lose our ventures." And Paul said "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." So, again, it is time to get back to business and be the church for our community

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And we are here this morning - as we are every time two or three gather in Jesus' name - to experience and then to achieve a new beginning. We often wonder how to do this... how to begin again without simply repeating the past. Jesus took us there this morning... we need to deal with the past before we move on into the future, and the way for the Christian to deal with the past and the promise of the future is straightforward – love. OK, that sounds so simplistic especially if we hear the word 'love' as a noun. No, it is a verb. It is active. It needs to move. Paul said it like this: "Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. So (and here is where it changes from a noun to a verb) , love your neighbour and get on with the new beginning. Love those who we minister to and get on with the new beginning. If your new beginning take you to a new job, a new school year, a new group... embrace the newness with love.

"I alone know the plans I have for you, plans to bring you prosperity and not disaster, plans to bring about the future you hope for." (Jeremiah 29:11 TEV)

A man had been wandering about in a forest for several days, not knowing which was the right way out. Suddenly he saw a man approaching him and his heart was filled with joy. "Now I shall find the way," he thought to himself. When they neared one another, he asked the man, "Tell me, which way is the right way out of the forest? I have been wandering about in this forest for many days." The other replied, "I do not know the way out either, for I have too been wandering, but this I can tell you: do not take the way I have been taking, for that will lead you astray. Now let us look for a new way out together."

We may not know the way out of the forest that surrounds the work and witness of the Presbyterian Church of St. David, but of this we can be certain. The only way forward is 'together' – each and every one of us committing ourselves to finding the way, walking in the way, taking the footsteps of the one who is the way and finding that place God has for us.

Often, it's the only way to achieve a new beginning.

Behold, O God, we enter Your presence: God, holy and just, you who are Truth, Loyalty, Serenity, Justice, Goodness. In your presence we must prostrate ourselves as Moses did and say with Peter: Depart from me for I am a sinner . We know that there is only one thing that we can say to You: Have mercy on us. We need Your mercy, because we have failed. We are unworthy of Your mercy, but we humbly desire Your unfailing mercy. We are beings of this world, not yet lost; beings who still long for the heavens of Your goodness, who willingly receive the inexhaustible gift of Your mercy.

Lord, look upon our prayers: see how reluctantly we fulfill this duty and how cheerfully, for the most part, our hearts turn from talking with You to other things.

Look upon our work: it is barely satisfactory, forced from us by the pressure of daily life, rarely prompted by true love of You.

Listen to our words: the words of selfless kindness and love are rare.

Look upon us, O God: You will see no great sinners, only small ones; ones whose sins are small, mean and commonplace; whose will and heart, mind and strength are mediocre in every respect, even in wickedness.

But, O God, when we really reflect on this, we despair. Our mediocrity the cloak behind which we hide the worst thing of all, in the hope that it will not be discovered: a selfish and cowardly heart, a dull and insensitive heart which knows no generosity of spirit nor breadth of mind?

Have pity on these, our poor hearts, magnanimous and loving God,

God of blessed abundance. May Your Spirit burn deep and awaken them!

May Your Spirit make our hearts humble and contrite: let them be filled with longing for Your sanctity and with confidence in Your all-powerful grace!

May Your Spirit fill our hearts with the holy penitence which is the beginning of the heavenly life and with confidence in the invincible power of Your assistance, which brings courage and readiness, cheerfulness and boldness to the hearts which serve You. Only if You give us Your grace, can we feel how much we need it. Only the gift of Your mercy makes us recognize and confess that we are poor sinners.

Through Him who was crucified all is changed: darkness into light, death into life, weakness into strength, emptiness and loneliness into fullness and closeness to You. God of all mercies and comfort, have mercy on us. And our hearts will praise your goodness for ever. Amen

(Karl Rahner, adapted)

Thanksgiving and intercession

Let us pray for the Church and for the world, and let us thank God for divine goodness. Almighty God, our heavenly Father, you promised through your Son Jesus Christ to hear us when we pray in faith.

We pray for your Church today, gathering all around the world in tiny churches and great cathedrals, to praise you, to hear your holy word, and to meet you in bread and wine. Give us a sense of expectation as we come, and inspiration as we go. Help us to put our differences behind us and to unite instead behind the great commission of Jesus, to make disciples of all nations.

Pause

We pray for a world which struggles to live justly and in peace. We pray for those who have to search for daily food or walk long distances for water. We remember with sadness those whose lives are cut short by disease or violence, and those who have fled their homes in fear. We pray for those who meet persecution and torture with courage and dignity. May your kingdom come and your will be done on earth as it is in the heavenly places.

Pause

We thank you for those people who sustain us by their love and forgiveness. Thank you for the network of people with whom our lives are inextricably linked and who make up the fabric of our family and community life. We especially pray for those returning to their studies here and across the country that you fill them with enthusiasm and gratitude for the gift of an education. Make us alert to each others' needs and quick to serve and encourage one another. May our gentleness with each other reflect your gentleness with us.

Pause

We pray for those who are laid low by suffering and those who are experiencing the assault of pain. We trust your love for us and for all people, and your deep desire for our well-being. As we name in our hearts those who are in the grip of suffering, help us so to pray and to act that they may know your comfort and healing, both now and in the coming days.

Pause

We thank you for those people who have given us the examples and models by which we try to live. We thank you for those who have lived and died in quiet holiness and whose prayers have helped to sustain the world. Help us to live in the light by which they lived, and to worship the source of that light, Jesus Christ our risen Lord. Rejoicing in the fellowship of all your saints, we commend ourselves and all people to your unfailing love. For the sake of your son Jesus Christ Amen.

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