

10-Sep-2017 Sermon

Brian Lennstrom

“Besides this,” writes Paul, “you know what time it is...” (R 13:11). Sorry, Paul, we really *don't* know what time it is. What time *is* it, Paul?

The book of Romans is a great summary of Paul's teaching and thinking on every subject related to God, Christ, His death, His resurrection, the Church, Judaism... He covers every subject... except one. Eschatology. The study of the End Times. Which Paul did write about extensively in his other letters. There's hardly *any* eschatology in the book of Romans, but lucky us! We have found the one passage in the book of Romans that has to do with eschatology. Four verses.

In today's reading from Romans we have a riddle and an embarrassment. We read about the return of Christ, which is an embarrassment, and about love for the neighbor. And we have Paul's curious assertion that we know what time it is. It is now the moment for us to wake from sleep. He doesn't mean clock time, of course. He doesn't mean that we should be awake and watching, like Christ wanted the disciples to be watching in the garden of Gethsemane.

So: an embarrassment, a riddle, and waking.

First, the embarrassment. The embarrassment of the New Testament has to do with the delay of the return of Christ. It's clear from the Gospels that the End Times would likely come even before

many of those present would pass away. Twenty years later, in the book of Thessalonians, Paul has to deal with the anxiety of the Thessalonians over the fact that some of the believers there had died before Christ had returned. Those who had died would be okay, he assured them. In the second letter to the Thessalonians, Paul has to correct the idea that the day of the Lord had already come. That somehow Jesus had slipped past them. And by the end of the New Testament, say, in II Peter, the author confronts the embarrassment directly. “In the last days, scoffers will come.... They will say, ‘Where is this “coming” he promised?’” (II Pet 3:3-4).

As one person put it, the early believers expected the return of Christ, but instead, they got the Church.

But this shows how unspiritual we are. Again, Paul says that we know what time it is, but we don't. Another version says that we “understand the time,” but we don't. The writer of the book of Hebrews says, “Today, if you hear God's voice, don't harden your hearts” (Heb 3:15). But our hearts *are* hard, because we are unspiritual, and we are unspiritual because our hearts are hard. *My heart is hard.*

Because the amount of time from the ascension of Christ to His return is small. What is large is the amount of time from when we fall asleep to when we awake. The amount of time—*real time*--from the ascension of Christ to His return is small. What is large is the amount of time from when we fall asleep to when we awake. That's the larger time.

Notice that the second time I said that, I added the words “real time.” Because the moments of our lives, the moments of our worship and our working and—more to the point of this passage—

the moments of our *loving*—are parables of the *real* moment. The moment that Paul says that we understand. The moment in which we are sleeping. And the moment of which Paul writes: “It is now... the moment for you to wake from sleep.” Clock time is a *parable* of this spiritual time, this eschatological time, this real time. We can learn something about real time from clocks, but this moment Paul writes about is a different kind of moment.

It is the moment of revelation. “Heaven and earth will pass away,” says Jesus, “but my words will never pass away” (Mk 12:10). “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven.” In other words, Simon understands not in the time of study nor the time of a system nor—to continue the thought from a few weeks ago—nor from the time of religion, but in the moment of revelation. At that moment, the voice we hear, like our mother’s voice calling us to awaken, is the sweet voice of God, revealing Himself to us.

It is the moment of repentance. “Let us lay awake 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...” (R 13:12b-13). And remember, he’s writing these words to people whom he’s already described as those “loved by God and called to be his holy people” (R 1:7). A lot of churches make a great deal of repentance and they add a lot of guilt. Perhaps they do it in the name of love but really, without love. That’s religion, isn’t it—guilt in the name of love but really, without love.

But maybe we *do* know what time it is in our own lives, to put aside the greed, the gossiping, the lusts, the supremacy. The kingdom of God is not a party; it’s oppressive, it pushes in on our chests, robbing us of breath. And this sin—*your* sin, *my* sin—is like a giant overcoat. We don’t

need it. It's just unnecessary weight as the kingdom of God oppresses us. And it's time we calmly and deliberately laid it aside.

And it is the moment of love. And here we back up a few verses to the beginning of the passage, and to the riddle of love. "The one who loves," writes Paul, "has fulfilled the law" (R 13:8). Now the riddle of love is, how do we love? Specifically, how do we love people we don't love? As Jesus says, if you love those who love you... if you greet only your own people, what good is it? (Mt 5:43-48). Anyone can love people who love them back. A dog can do that. In fact, maybe that should be in the Bible: "A new commandment I give unto thee, that you should love one another, as thy *poodle* loves thee."

The riddle of love is, how do you love people you don't love, because they don't love you back? How do you love the family member from whom you're estranged? How do you love passersby, the person next to you in line at Safeway? How do you love your enemy?

Well, the religion of piety says, You just love 'em. Cause that's what we Christians do. You use your self-discipline and you grit your teeth and you say, like Auntie Em in the Wizard of Oz, "Almira Gulch, for twenty-three years, I've been dying to tell you what I thought of you! And now... well, being a Christian woman, I can't say it!"

There's a great message for the post-religious world! "Have an issue confronting someone? Come to Christianity and we'll teach you *real* emotional and relational constipation." That's love, isn't it! That's what's known as "A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do" school of ethics. You hate 'em, but you love 'em. Because that's what a Christian's gotta do. You *grit your teeth*, and you love

'em.

And if you can do that, Auntie Em, you're just a little bit better than the next person. And remember, that's the dark goal of religion—just a little bit of an edge, spiritually-speaking.

The riddle of love is therefore, the riddle of our createdness, our own lost state, our own sin, and even our own death. The fact is, we *can't* love people we don't love. When you grit your teeth, it's not love. As Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, if your heart's not in it, then it's not love. The riddle here is the same as the riddle of why we keep sleeping. After all, Mother is calling, singing a wake-up song. But we interrupt her: "Just a minute, Mother..." and in another moment, it's back to sleep. We interrupt God and then, it's back to sleep. Back to the riddle.

How do we love? How do we stop interrupting God? That's the moment Paul is talking about. *This* is the moment. Today. You get to decide—we *all* get to decide—if all this church and all this social justice and all this piety and all this Bible—and all this God—if it's just a dream, or a guess, or a bet, or a habit, or some clothing we put on. Or is it what Kierkegaard called "the renunciation of knowledge" and that God *has* spoken in Jesus Christ; that we *have been* touched by the freedom of God; that He *has* renamed us as He did Simon, to Peter; that He *has* re-established our personalities. That we *do know* what time it is. That we *are* the neighbor. Whom God loves. That we *are* the traveler beaten by thieves and then ignored by the religious. And ignored by our religious selves. That we ignore even our own wounds and our own pains. That God is the Good Samaritan. And because He is dressing our wounds and singing His wake-up song, we *can* wake up. We may not understand every word He is singing, but that's okay. The baby loves the mother's singing even though it can't figure out exactly what the words mean.

And that because of that, and after that, we *do* love God in the neighbor. That's it's not Elmira Gulch that we're called to love. It may *look* like Elmira Gulch, in her long dress and her tall hat and her very sensible boots. But it's really God. And *He is not a dream*. When we confront Elmira, or our estranged child, or the person next in line at Safeway, we may think it's one human confronting another human. We may think it's time for the "a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do" ethics. But in reality, in the real moment, for which our own clock time is a parable, in the night that is far gone and in which the day is near, it is *God confronting God*.

Love for the neighbor is love for him in his strange and irritating createdness because love loosens the irritating createdness; because God is the beat-up traveler and God is the good Samaritan loving us and that love—to quote again from Kierkegaard—loosens our constitution so that our constitution is like a garment which falls from the shoulders.

That's the solution to the riddle of love. That's what time it is. To love is to protest against the course of this world. To love is to do the incomprehensible. To love is to fulfill the Law.

The Law. Now we're ready to complete the circle from the sermon a few weeks ago, when it was said that religion is a distraction from Christ, that religion is a system, a set of rules, a method, that the dark side of religion is that what we really want is to use religion as a way to get an edge over others. I don't mean the Church here, because the Church is the group of those who say to Jesus, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Having said that, the history of religion over the past two thousand years has quite an overlap with the history of the Church over the same time period.

But we're ready to close the circle because in the first century, the religion that symbolizes religion, the piety that seeks to be victorious piety, the obedience that demands sacrifice—is Judaism. Judaism, where it was said that even God studied the Torah, where Jesus accused the religious leaders of traveling over land and sea to win a single convert, and when they had succeeded, they made them twice as much a child of hell as they were (Mt 23:15). And where a woman was not allowed to look in a mirror on the Sabbath, because if she looked in a mirror she may see a gray hair and if she saw a gray hair she might be tempted to pluck it out and if she plucked it out that was like harvesting and harvesting was work and work was forbidden on the Sabbath. Judaism, to whom Paul in the second chapter of Romans said that they relied on the law and boasted in God; that they thought they knew His will and approved of what was superior; that they were convinced they were a guide for the blind and a light in the darkness; that in fact they could teach others, but they could not teach themselves. And the cornerstone; the foundation; the bedrock of Judaism was Torah, was the Law. You couldn't perfectly obey it--it was too comprehensive and so strict, but the closer you got, the better.

Here Paul says that those who love the neighbor have fulfilled the law. Finé. Not as religion, but as God's command to love. Not for advantage. Because when we love the neighbor, the *reality* is God is both the Good Samaritan and the beaten-up traveler. And *we* are the Samaritan. And the traveler. And *they* are the Samaritan and the traveler. In God's time. And we *do* know what time that is.

"You know what time it is," Paul writes. "It is now the moment for you to wake from sleep." Today, it is time to awake. We know whose sweet voice awakens us; we know the power of that voice; we know that now is the moment for us to wake from sleep. To join the church. To smile at the person next in line at Safeway. To make the phone call or the visit to the estranged child. To

look a homeless person in the eyes. To take the Eucharist. To pray. The lie of the devil is that we're not quite ready to love—but we soon will be.

But we know that the delay of Christ is short, and our own sleeping is long. And, thank God, the good news is that the night *is* far gone, and the day is near. That salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers. That despite hurricanes and hydrogen bombs and religion, that salvation is near and that we *can awaken*.