

A sermon preached at Zion Episcopal Church
15th Sunday after Pentecost, year A, September 10, 2023
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This week and last, we have been hearing the ethical summary of Paul's letter to the Roman's. From chapters 12-15, Paul makes the case that the gospel of Jesus cannot stay in theoretical or ideological realms. We are to make the good news of God's love visible in the current contexts in which we live; in our homes and families, in our work, in our communities, and in our nation.

We have had our fill of troubles this summer. Climate change is causing more epic fires around the globe, with unprecedented acreage lost. Severe drought has dried up water sources in Arizona, California, Mexico, and South America. Russia continues to bombard Ukraine destroying cities and countless lives. School systems and towns across the country are eliminating libraries and banning books. Disparaging and threatening people with different religious or political views is increasingly common. Social media and tv news stations have been bombarding us for months with images and discussions of all these disasters.

It is interesting that to even bring up some of these topics, can earn one the label of 'being woke.' In some circles, that is an insult. But in Paul's letter to the Romans, he urges each of us to 'wake up.' He said to the Romans and to us as well, you know what time it is, it is time to wake from sleep; we are closer than ever to God's saving love! It is time, he urges, to lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. It is time for us to live honorably and wrap the love of Christ around ourselves and each and every person we encounter.

More than ever, we need Paul's reminder that the summary of God's commandments is love. Love your neighbor as yourself. As we think about our responses to all that is happening, in the world and in our personal lives, let's start here; with our neighbor and ourselves and with the love of God between us. Let's always start here, because this is the core of God's vision, what Jesus called the 'Kingdom of Heaven' and which our Presiding Bishop calls God's vision of the 'Beloved Community.'

Before we can work towards the beloved community, before we can reach out to others in need or distress, we need to make sure that each one of us is grounded in the knowledge that we are each loved by God more than we can imagine. No matter our faults and imperfections, no matter how much we have messed up, God loves each and every person and all of creation. It is from this identity as God's own beloved that we can begin to love our neighbors as ourselves, and to remember that the term neighbor is not a geographical concept, it a moral concept. People on the other side of the globe are just as much our neighbor as the people living right next door.

And what is love? Among other things, as we learn in Corinthians, "Love is patient, love is kind. Love does not envy, is not boastful, is not arrogant, is not rude, is not self-seeking, is not irritable, and does not keep a record of wrongs."

I urge you in the midst of all the distressing news that bombards us each day-to call yourself beloved and know and trust the truest thing of all; that God knows you better even than you know yourself and that you are God's beloved.

Please practice good self-care- be sure not to neglect your times of rest and prayer, resist becoming isolated- gather with others for support and fellowship. In these ways we can boost our resilience and bolster hope in order to be ready to hear how God would have us address the things we are facing as healthy individuals and a healthy community.

The core of God's beloved community is in the caring relationships that we initiate and nurture. Jesus said to his disciples, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." Now imagine these relationships of care and good will radiating out locally, regionally and globally –connecting and encompassing all of humanity. And Jesus said that if two of us agree on earth about anything we ask, it will be done. Let us hold on to the vision of the Beloved Community – and pray God's will be done.

Gracious and loving God, we ask you to enter our hearts and heal our brokenness. Your love is overflowing in our moments of grief and desolation. When the world seems to go astray, and our human abilities fail, we rely on your compassion to offer amazing grace, the grace that surpasses our human understanding. May we regain the vision of your kingdom of peace, hope, and love that you instilled in our beings. When our human knowledge and skills to unite fail, grant us your wisdom to imagine and dream new ways to usher your kingdom here on earth. Amen.