

DO YOU KNOW WHAT TIME IT IS?

Ex. 12:1-14 / Rom. 13:8-14

When Paul wrote his letter to faithful of the church in Rome, Rome was a mess. It was a city deeply divided between the haves and the have-nots. It was a city teeming with a multitude of religious traditions. Its Pantheon, literally a structure dedicated to “all gods,” exhibited statues to all these gods but left one pedestal empty, just in case they forgot a god so he or she who would not exact revenge upon them. It was a city of competing philosophies and immigrants from all over the known world. All Roman residents were obligated to live by the law of the empire which had been corrupted by ambitious politicians. And noble notions such as morality, fairness, equity and justice, once the hallmarks of a glorious Roman empire at its peak, had been all but abandoned.

So where did the loyalties of a follower of Jesus belong in this hodgepodge of competing allegiances? How was one to live in a context of a multitude of religions and philosophies? How was one to engage social unrest and stark economic inequalities? How was one to conduct oneself when confronted with people with whom one did not have anything in common?

Paul’s answer: “Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled Torah, God’s instructions for living together in community.” Of course, Paul echoes Jesus’s greatest commandment here. However, interestingly, Paul emphasizes the second part of that commandment, our love of neighbor, and not the first, our love of God. Concretely, Paul clarifies, loving our neighbor means not sleeping around, not committing premeditated murder, not stealing, and not trying to grab what belongs to somebody else just because we want to have it. “Love does no wrong to the neighbor,” Paul writes, “therefore love is the fulfillment of Torah, God’s instructions for living together in community.”

But since Paul knows all about our challenges and limitations concerning what it means to be human, and how difficult it is to honestly confront these challenges and limitations, and then transcend them, he re-frames the whole issue of loving our neighbor by asking a strange question: “Do you know what time it is?” Right away, he gives the answer to his own question: “It’s time to wake up, sleepyheads! Time to get up! Don’t walk around as if it’s still dark outside! You know how I know that it is daylight? I know because Christ has saved us and that has brought everything into a new and different light. You cannot undo that.”

The *New Testament* has two words for our notion of time. “Chronos,” from which we get chronology, the notion that time is linear and moves from point A to point B. This is clock time, seconds and minutes and hours and days counting down like a dooms day clock. This is the way we mainly live our lives. And then there is “*kairos*,” the right time, when everything falls into place and makes sense, when doors open that were shut, when the impossible becomes a reality. This is God’s time over which we human beings have no control whatsoever. “Instead,” Paul writes, “put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.”

Paul does not pepper us here with a theological or philosophical diatribe. This is not a debate about right or wrong, better or worse, good or evil. It is not about getting on the moral high horse, not about who is in and who is out, not about who is deserving and who is not. Paul's exhortation to the faithful in Rome is a call to ethics, a call to living together in community in fulfillment of God's desire for all people. "Don't get bogged down with stuff," he says. "Don't always think about what you want. Instead, think about life together and what it takes to make it a reality. And the only way to do that, is to start with loving your neighbor, with loving what you do not know and what might be utterly strange and foreign to you. You start with that kind of love because it takes any whiff of moral superiority out of the equation." Or, we might want to say in more contemporary parlance: love without justice is empty, and justice without love is blind.

It is important to remember at this point that Paul was a Jew. He was born a Jew, was brought up and steeped in Hebrew religion and the stories of the Hebrew people. As a Jew, Paul was shaped by the core narrative of the Hebrews which still is the core narrative a Jews today: the Exodus story, the liberation of the Hebrew people from 430 years of brutal oppression and the yoke of slavery by the Egyptians. When the time comes for Moses to finally lead his people to freedom, it is a hurried affair. The first *Passover*, the last meal the Hebrews would eat in captivity, is not a huge celebration of victory, but a rushed, cobbled-together event: "This is how you shall eat this meal: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly." They didn't have much time to think. "Eat and get out of Egypt as quickly as possible" was their marching orders. "Make no provisions for the flesh, to gratify its desires," Paul wrote later. "Get up and go, quickly, because now is the time, now is God's time. Delay only at your own peril."

A few years ago, I was invited to co-officiate at a wedding in Nashville. Before the festivities began, Renita and I had some time to do some sightseeing and so we went to an old industrial park which had been converted into small shops and venues. Part of the tour included the Nelson Greenbriar Distillery which interested me because it was founded by Germans who had immigrated to the United States (of course, I was not interested at all that they happen to make some of the finest bourbon available).

In any event, John Philip Nelson—yes, he was German in spite of the name—owned a soap and candle factory in Hagenow, a small town in Northern Germany in the early 1800s. When times got tough, he decided to sell his business and move his family to America in hope of a better life. He converted the proceeds of the sale into gold bars which he had sown into the lining of his suit so that nobody could steel them on the passage across the ocean. On November 19, 1850, the ship encountered gale force winds and intense storms which sank the ship. Most of the the 180 passengers survived the wreck, including John Philip Nelson's family. But he did not. Unwilling to tear open the lining of his suit and get rid of the heavy gold bars, the provision of the flesh, so to speak, dragged John to the bottom of the ocean to his untimely death.

I think I remembered this story because it connected me with the Exodus story and Paul's admonition to love my neighbor in a profound way. And in these unsettling times, where it is very human and very easy to think of ourselves first, I wonder: What am I, what are we willing to leave behind in order to love our neighbor more fully, and by doing so, loving ourself, and God? What do I, what do we need to jettison to choose life in community, and life in general? Would I, would we, hang on to what I, what we possess and, like John Philip Nelson go down with the ship or would I, would we be willing to let our baggage go in order to survive?

If I had to make a decision today what to pack because, like the Hebrews, I had to get out of town as quickly as I can, I am not sure what I would take. I would most likely think of material items, and loving my neighbor would probably not the first but the last thing on my mind right then. Perhaps that is exactly why Paul reminds us that what's likely the last thing on our minds is the most important thing of all. Because it is the first thing on God's mind.

As we celebrate the Lord's Supper together today, it becomes once again abundantly clear that God so loved us, that God so loved the world that God would endure the death of God's son so that we, so that all people might live. As we "put on Jesus" today, God's great love for us becomes once again a reality for us. And as we commit ourselves to loving our neighbor, God's great love becomes manifest to the world.

Rev. Dieter U. Heinzl, PhD
Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church (USA), St. Louis, MO
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