

## October 18, 2020 – St. Andrew's (Sarnia)

### Romans 13:8-14

8 Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. 9 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." 10 Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

11 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; 12 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. 13 Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. 14 Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.

### Message: Story Time

Can you believe it's been thirty weeks  
since we had our last "normal" church service?  
It was March 15, and we had our St. Patrick's lunch afterwards.  
Wasn't that a wonderful time together?  
I remember thinking,  
if we had to shut for a while,  
that this is a good way to say  
"see you later" to each other.

Of course, none of us thought it would be September  
before we met in person once more.  
And here we are, nearly seven months later...  
...and the news is nearly as bad again now as it was last spring.  
Only this time, we have first-hand experience  
of just how difficult life can be  
with a pandemic in full swing.

I'm not sure if I find it unbelievable because it's only been 30 weeks,  
or because it has been a whole long 30 weeks...  
...time has passed very strangely during the pandemic.  
Days feel like weeks, and yet weeks can go by in a flash!  
Some of the world ground to a halt,  
and yet some people had to work much harder  
and in much more challenging conditions  
than ever before.

Sometimes, I've had to overcome my own inertia to get anything done,  
and yet other times, I've had to remind myself and even stop myself  
from doing something, because it's not safe or possible right now.

So I was thinking about time and life in a pandemic,  
and how worrying it is to imagine  
that we might be headed into a long winter  
of restrictions and rising COVID case numbers.  
And Paul's words in verse 11 really caught my attention:  
"Besides this, you know what time it is,  
how it is now the moment  
for you to wake from sleep."

As we head into round two of this awful global crisis,  
as we peer through the fog of pandemic time,  
struggle against the apathy and inactivity,  
cope with the anxiety and the isolation...  
...is now really the moment?

Is now the moment for us to be doing anything,  
other than waiting this thing out,  
hibernating until it's over and we can get back to normal?  
Is now still the time, still the moment,  
for God's people, for Christ's followers,  
to be sharing the good news,  
standing witness to who God is?

This morning's Scripture reading comes from Paul's letter to the Romans,  
his last and longest letter.  
We know that, although Paul did not found this particular church,  
he was familiar with it.  
And, in this letter, he was responding  
to reports of division between Jewish Christians  
and Gentile, Roman Christians,  
two very different groups of people  
who were, together, following this new faith,  
and who were struggling,  
with each other  
and with their surrounding culture.

Paul started by talking about love,  
referencing Jesus' words

when he talks about the Greatest Commandment.  
 In the Gospel, when Jesus was asked,  
 out of all of the commandments,  
 which one was the greatest,  
 he responded by saying we should  
 love the Lord, our God,  
 with all of our heart, our mind and our soul,  
 and we should love our neighbour  
 as ourselves.  
 In other words: Love God. Love people.

Paul re-delivers Jesus' message.  
 He bring up the ten commandments,  
 familiar to his Jewish Christian readers,  
 perhaps reminding the Roman Christian members  
 of the church  
 that there *are* rules that they need to live by...  
 ...but that all God's laws and rules  
 can be summed up in love;  
 that love is the fulfillment of them all.

They knew and we know, of course,  
 that this is not romantic love or family love  
 or even a loving feeling, really, at all;  
 it's active love that decides and thinks and does  
 for the good of others;  
 it's agape love.  
 So, love God and love others.  
 And then Paul cranks up the urgency a bit:  
*now* is the moment to love God and love others,  
 because salvation is closer now than when we first believed.

Like so many of the early Christian churches,  
 it seems that the church in Rome was struggling  
 with Jesus being a no-show,  
 or at least taking way too long to come back.

Many of Jesus' first generation of followers  
 expected him to return during their lifetimes,  
 and as the second coming failed to happen,  
 uncertainty about what that meant  
 and what they should be doing arose.

Here in Rome, it seems that spiritual indifference had taken root.  
 God's laws – codified and maintained by his people,  
 explained and elaborated upon by Jesus and the apostles –  
 were being ignored.

All the things that Paul lists  
 – carousing and drunkenness, sexual immorality and debauchery,  
 dissension and jealousy –  
 well, the Roman elite,  
 likely under the emperor Nero at this point,  
 were voracious, hungry consumers  
 of all those things.

The powerful and wealthy people of Rome were famous for their excess.  
 So Paul urgently reminds them  
 to rebel against conforming to the world around them,  
 to wake up,  
 shake off the apathy and the arguing and the doubts,  
 and live *for* Jesus, *like* Jesus, now  
 because every moment counted.

Paul was not actually talking about how to live through a pandemic;  
 he was talking about societal problems,  
 including sexual promiscuity, alcohol use, conflicts and jealousy,  
 which are not at all the same thing.  
 And yet, there is a parallel to our situation.

Paul is saying that we should live for Christ now,  
 rebelling against conformity with the attitudes and habits of the world,  
 resisting the traps that we cannot quite help but fall into...  
 ...pushing all of that aside so that we can live *love* for Christ.

Conforming to the world these days looks more like  
 arguing and picking sides,  
 using a health crisis for political or personal leverage,  
 spreading fear, blaming others, and acting selfishly.  
 The traps of anxiety, isolation,  
 fear and anger  
 loom large, all around us.

Is now still the time, still the moment, for God's people?  
 Is now the moment to love God and love others?

I believe it is.

Now is the moment for us, as Christ-followers,  
to keep proclaiming the Gospel of the kingdom of God.  
Now is the moment for us to care for one another  
and for our communities,  
and to think creatively about how to do that.

Now is the moment for all of us to believe in the promises of our faith,  
to believe that God is good,  
and to believe that we can overcome this crisis  
we are still facing together.  
The world needs to be reminded  
that in the face of every divisive issue,  
every scary circumstance  
and every impossible scenario,  
there are people who can and will  
love God  
and love one another,  
no matter what.

But here is the question I think we need to ask ourselves.  
When we come out on the other side of this  
– whenever that is and whatever it looks like –  
what do we want people to remember  
about how we responded?  
What do we want our witness  
as Christians together to be?  
Do we want people to remember  
that we fell into the traps of our own humanness  
and let anger, blame or fear  
dictate the shape of our faith  
and how we shared that faith with others?  
Or do we want people to remember  
that we responded with love?

Paul tells us to put on the “armor of light,”  
and that’s some personal protective equipment  
I think we’d all happily wear!  
We put on the armor of light,  
clothe ourselves with Jesus  
and everything he taught us to be and do.  
And then we keep sharing the hope we have for God’s coming kingdom,  
and we keep helping others to know God.

We respond to the trials and challenges that life often throws at us  
and dig deep into our faith  
instead of turning away from it.  
And we understand that we are journeying  
through this global pandemic  
and that it will end.

One of the many things I love about St. Andrew's  
is that we are a church of deep history and many, many stories.

And I've been wondering... When we tell the story of the COVID-19 pandemic  
some years from now,  
or when today's children tell their children about it even later,  
what will be said?

Will we talk about the people who died,  
the economies that crashed,  
the hardships that people endured,  
the selfishness and hoarding and greed,  
the way that lives became counters  
in a game of politics and power,  
the complaining and quarrelling  
that surfaced?

Or will we share stories of God's presence among us during this time?  
Will we tell the coming generation  
about how we stayed together and took care of each other,  
even when we were stuck in our homes?  
Stories of how we looked out for each other's needs,  
of the ways we complied with recommendations  
to keep each other healthy and safe  
even when we did not want to?  
Stories of how we gave as generously as we were able  
to help those in greater need than ourselves,  
to continue the ministry  
and mission of the church?

Will we tell how we remembered and clung to the promises of Scripture,  
to the certainty that God is love and is still in charge of this world,  
even in the midst of a pandemic,  
and how God enabled us to do that?

Those would be good stories to tell, a better history to remember.

I cannot think of a better message than this for us to hear  
as we transition into yet another season of the COVID-19 pandemic:  
It is now the moment.

It is now the moment to show the community who we are,  
as a church and as followers of Jesus.

It is now the moment to sink deep into our faith  
and embrace the hope that God promises us.

It is now the moment to love God and love others,  
to let that love continue to shape our lives,  
even now, especially now.

And one day, may we look back at this time  
– at our church, our community, our St. Andrew's family –  
and see that our COVID-19 response  
was to do what we have always been called to do,  
what we have always, faithfully, tried to do:  
we loved God, and we loved others.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.