

Camille Cook Howe  
Georgetown Presbyterian Church  
Kick Off Sunday

September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2023.  
Romans 13:8-14  
Be in the Game

*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 Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Jenna Bush Hager recently told a story about the advice that her grandfather gave her. The former President George Bush Sr, at the end of his life was struggling even to speak. His voice was a whisper and he leaned in and said to Jenna, "Don't forget to be in the game."

I love the reflective grandfatherly advice yearning for the hustle and bustle of earlier days – the meetings, appointments, sporting events, back to school nights, fundraisers, church services, family celebrations. The grandfather telling the granddaughter to be fully immersed in it all. After the quieter pace of the summer months, "the game" is up and running. And we must decide how to be in it. What are we going to do? How will we behave? What will make the cut? Who will get our time? How will be oriented?

I feel very fortunate to have been out of DC for much of August. I was exploring national parks out west, visiting family, and spending time with friends. The time away was wonderful but it meant that getting back into the swing of things, or 'the game' has felt like a bigger adjustment than usual. My first trip to a DC grocery store nearly caused an existential crisis for me. 'Why, O Lord, do we behave like wolves? I asked the divine in Wegmans' as rude Washingtonians clamored around me for bags of greens and cases of sparkling water. Is *this* being in the game?

No, thank you. The traffic, the pressures, the obligations, the to-do lists – it is a lot. So how are we going to do this in a way that we can tolerate it and survive it and even enjoy it? This was the exact question Paul was trying to address in the letter he was writing to the early Christians in Rome. They were living in a time where the local culture was pulling them away from the values of the faith. So, kind of like today!

The values of our culture are not exactly encouraging the Christian faith. For the values of our society are different than the values of Christianity, they just are! And that is not a new thing so don't pretend be shocked or scandalized and blame it on the democrats or republicans. Being Christian is counter cultural so unless you are living in a convent or some remote isolated Christian community you are going to be at odds with the culture. Paul in writing to the church in Rome,

around 57 CE, urges them to pay attention to how they are being in the game and reminds them they have are called to a different way of living. He employs the metaphor of waking and sleeping. Now is not the time to be inattentive, wake up and get dressed, he says! The dressing Paul talks about is putting off the works of darkness and putting on the armor of light.

Paul lists four of the ten commandments – adultery, murder, sin, and coveting. These four are representative of all the others. Why these four though? Prof. Robert Jewett suggests that Paul chose these four because they had particular relevance for the followers of Jesus in Rome, many of whom lived in the slums and tenements of the city, where theft, murder, and coveting were part of daily life. Cheating, stealing, killing, and coveting were the game in Rome and Paul needed the Christians to realize that this was not their calling. Their lives must be reordered around a new value system, for those things represented darkness and they were called to live in the light.

Now Paul’s theology about waking up and being alert and living in the light refers to something much deeper than beginning a new church and signing up for the pancake breakfast, to Paul this is about the imminent return of Jesus and doing gospel work in the meantime. For Paul, there was urgency – because the work was so needed, and life was so short, and Paul knew anyone could meet Jesus at any time. If time is short, then it all matters – “don’t forget to be in the game.”

This summer we did a Pew to Pulpit sermon series where we asked you to send us your questions, and we would try to answer them in our sermons. One short, anonymous question we received was just, “When is Jesus coming back?” Well...that’s not a sermon – that is a mystery for the ages. Paul thought Jesus was very coming soon and so he needed them to wake up and stop living in darkness. “Murder when Jesus is coming tomorrow, are you kidding me?” “You need to steal something when you aren’t even going to be around in a week?” For Paul, they needed to take this all seriously and live into their faith every single day. Now Paul was wrong about the timing of Jesus’ return, but Paul was not wrong about the need for people to reject the cultural norms of the day and embrace a way of living that reflected the way of Jesus.

Following the life and the way of Jesus, for the Christian, is the game. That is our calling. Okay, so Paul tells them to wake up and get dress but what next? What are they supposed to do now that they have tied their put their Christian shoes on? The advice from Jesus and from Paul and from every preacher worth their salt ever since, is the same – you just spend your days, every single precious day you have on this earth, loving your neighbor as yourself. Wake up, get dressed, and love your neighbor. That’s how to be in the game. This is not cheap sentimentality; this is about how you fulfill the law of God, how you listen to prophets of the ages, how you follow the eternal commandments, how you live in the light, how you prepare to meet Jesus – love your neighbor as yourself. Love is the essence of discipleship.

The ancient Jewish sage Hillel said, “That which you hate do not do to your fellows; this is the whole law, the rest is commentary.” Jesus doubled down on this summary of the law found in the Hebrew scriptures when he was questioned by the Pharisees about which of the commandments was the greatest Jesus said, “Love God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength and love your neighbor as yourself.” The rest is just commentary.

Two thousand years ago Jesus spoke those words but more importantly two thousand years ago – Jesus lived those words. Love of God and love of neighbor. As Christians, we model our lives after a man whose faith was steadfast, a man who could love others without judgement of their sins, a man who could serve without expectation of repayment, a man who could speak articulately to the educated and poetically to the common man, a man whose heart was always expanding with love for those he met along the way. Jesus showed us that we must make choices about how we live our lives. Being in the game can take a variety of forms. For the Christian, for the one who seeks to follow Jesus, it means being intentional, being alert, being conscientious about how we love God and love God’s people, setting aside the darkness and putting on the light. It is a value system and a different way to be oriented in the world.

Rev. Dean Thompson told this story about a church member of his from Pasadena. A women plagued with depression and anxiety for two years visited a psychiatrist’s office located across the street from his Presbyterian church. Every week she would go into her appointment, and she would look out the windows of the therapist’s office and gazed upon the church façade. Then one Sunday morning, the Spirit prompted her to actually visit the church. When she arrived, she was greeted by a 80-year-old women named Helen who could tell she was anxious and realized she was new. “You’re a visitor,” she said, “and I have no one to sit with. Won’t you please sit with me?” She did and Helen squeezed her hand during the service.

Love your neighbor as yourself. Helen was on the lookout for new neighbors. The biblical category for ‘neighbor’ is not those who live close to you – it is far more expansive – it isn’t just your family and friends, it isn’t just the people you like and agree with, it isn’t the people who you know well or understand – it is a category that encompasses every single person you meet along the way. Your neighbor is the stranger heading into church, the person in the checkout line, the person at the table next to you, the voice on the other end of the telephone. Your neighbor is every person you ever encounter. Loving your neighbor as yourself means opening yourself to those you meet along the way and being ready so show love according to their needs. That is the biblical code for how to be in the game. And it is a game worthy of our whole lives...so it’s fall kick off...let’s go!!!!

Amen.