

Romans 13:8-14; Ex 12:1-14
September 4, 2011

South Plains
Union Grove

Wake Up Call

The two scripture readings for today are coincidentally appropriate for Labor Day weekend because they both deal with public life, the way the people of God are supposed to act in the community. Exodus 12 tells the Hebrew slaves in Egypt how they should celebrate their liberation from slavery, how they should wake up to freedom. Once they had escaped Egypt, every year the Jews remembered the gift of freedom with this Passover meal. In a similar way, we celebrate Labor Day in order to remember 'Labor,' men and women whose physical effort keeps the community free from hunger and want. Someone once told me that South Plains has been historically a working class congregation. I'm proud of that label.

Paul's letter to the Romans addresses Christians living under the thumb of the Roman Empire. They were not all slaves like the Hebrews in Egypt, but they were regarded with suspicion and sometimes with hostility because, like the Hebrews, they were different. There was no Promised Land for Christians in those days. Therefore Paul must help the Christians in Rome learn to live freely within the Empire. This is a wakeup call to live in the world, but not of the world. A lot of Christians today find themselves in a similar situation. We have to live in the world without becoming like the world. We

have to make peace with the reality that we live and work beside people whose morals often are crude, whose values seem skewed, and whose world is organized around selfishness and greed. We don't want to be that way.

Every mother worries about giving her children the right morals and values. When I was growing up, I did not know any middle class African Americans. Schools and churches in Albemarle County were strictly segregated. So, I was pleased as an adult when I met an African American engineer and his wife. We discovered we had much in common. We were all Presbyterians and their son was at Princeton Seminary. The son was single. As we talked I learned that the parents were worried that living in the North so close to New York City, their boy might be led astray by the materialism and loose morals in that part of the world. I remember thinking to myself, "That woman sounds just like my mother." It was one of many wakeup calls in my sheltered life when I have had to face my own cockeyed assumptions that black people are different from white people. The truth is that Christians are different from non-Christians. Or, at least, we're supposed to be different in some important ways.

In this letter, Paul is trying to show the members of the church in Rome how to be different in ways that can be compatible with the rest of the world. It does not guarantee an easy life because Christianity is not always

easy. It is a way of living guaranteed to be ultimately, eternally, more satisfying.

Paul's guidance should not be surprising.

The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet' and any other commandment," he says, "are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'

What is surprising is how thoroughly adultery, murder, stealing, and covetousness have penetrated our lives until we scarcely notice the news accounts and the soap operas until one of those sins explodes like a land mine in our own family. Too often that has been the experience of people we love and perhaps within our own homes.

Another surprise is how neatly Paul sums up the commandments, "Love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law." Karl Barth, the German theologian of the twentieth century said that "love of one another ought to be undertaken as the protest against the course of this world."

Love as "the protest against the course of this world," sounds a little strange. Who could be against love. But, the gospel says it is not loving to commit adultery, it's selfish. The gospel says that murder is still murder, even if the killing is done wrongly in the name of

peace, or for the sake of law and order. The gospel says stealing does not show love to the victim of a theft no matter what the motive may be.

The last commandment Paul mentions is the most surprising of all. "Thou shall not covet." Coveting means that we become consumed with desire for something that is not ours. Consumed with desire is dangerously close to being a consumer; and consumers are the bedrock of our capitalist economy. Paul is suggesting to us that consumption has limits; consumption can undermine faith; consumption can eat up our souls. Immediately after the attack on the World Trade Center when Wall Street and the entire US economy seems imperiled, do you remember what our president advised us to do? "Go shopping," he said. It was an innocent piece of advice and a telling commentary on where our real security lies. When we are so consumed with the desire to buy that we act on that desire, then the economy stays healthy. At least that'

Don't get me wrong. I love the way our system works. Nevertheless, the commandment warns us that consuming and coveting are fraternal twins of desire. The first is a necessity of living. The second is a kind of self-centeredness that pushes God to the margin and ensures our spiritual death.

One of the best illustrations of the conflict between the values of the world and the values of Christian faith is seen in the story of the conversion of St. Augustine. The

passage from Romans provided the tipping point in his struggle to live a Christian life. Augustine was a North African, born at the time when the Roman Empire was losing its power as it decayed morally and spiritually. His family was not rich. Nevertheless, a wealthy patron realized his potential and sponsored his education. He seemed destined for an ordinary life that we might today call solidly middle class. The money he received from his patron had two effects on his life, good and bad. The good effect was his education, his exposure to the best of the ancient philosophers and the opportunity to travel and meet influential leaders across the known world. But, this cosmopolitan life had a down side. It brought with it all the temptations of privilege including pride, ambition, and vanity as well as loose morals. He led the life of a minor celebrity.

It was customary for a young man with his advantages to take a mistress which Augustine did. The evidence points to a loving relationship with the woman and with the child of that relationship. However, his life had no direction. To his credit, he realized that he was drifting aimlessly. His mother, a faithful Christian, had tried for years to persuade her son to follow Jesus Christ. He struggled for years between the lure of the flesh and the call of the church. In fact he tells us that as a youth, he prayed fervently to God, "God make me chaste...but not too soon."

In young manhood, this struggle began to tear him apart emotionally. He was pulled in one direction to

enjoy his worldly ambitions and pleasures. But, he knew those ambitions and pleasures were selfish. The other pull was toward baptism and toward a faithful life of service. The problem was that he wanted both. On the verge of a nervous breakdown, he threw himself on the ground one day in tears. He screams to his friend, "What is wrong with us? Do we feel no shame?"

As he lay there on the ground, he heard a child's voice singing these words, "Pick up and read. Pick up and read." The words caught his attention because he could not remember any game with that song. What he did remember was the story of two people whose lives were changed by reading a passage of scripture. He got up off the ground, and ran into the house determined to read the first words in the book he had just laid down. It was the book of Romans. His eye fell on the end of our passage for today:

...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.

It was the wake up call that gave us one of the greatest saints of Christianity. His ambitions were harnessed to the gospel of Jesus Christ. His life from that day belonged to God. He was not perfect. But, God used him to purify, to unify and to teach the church how

to live in the world without being of the world. May it be
so for us.