Sunday, September 8, 2002
LOOKING, LIVING AND LOVING
Romans 13:8-14

There are many ways to begin a sermon. One of the most traditional methods is to quote a short Biblical passage as the text and then proceed. That's what I'm doing today. Here's the text for this sermon: St. Paul wrote in his letter to the church in Rome, Romans 13:8, "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law."

Like Jesus, Paul knew that God's love for the creation and for us, and our love of God and neighbor, is the heart and soul of the Christian faith. Jesus said, "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son." He also said, "All the commandments can be summed up in one: love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself." And it was Paul who wrote, in addition to the text for this sermon, in his first letter to the church in Corinth: "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." Then he went on to describe many of the qualities of love: "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

All of this might sound very basic to you, and it is. But it needs to be stated over and over again because there has been a tendency throughout the history of the Christian faith and its Jewish ancestry to turn religious faith into a narrow, legalistic, exclusive institution where there are the saved and the lost, with nothing in between.

In this kind of religious practice, believing the right doctrines and using the right words to express your faith becomes the key. Believe the right way or go to hell. What you believe is more important than what you do.

Here's an example of the kind of story sometimes used in legalistic Christian Sunday School materials. Three little boys, Tommy and his two friends, Bobby and Billy, go out on Halloween against their parents' wishes to trick-or-treat. They get frightened by actors dressed as demons and witches at a simulated haunted house and run into the street to escape. One of the boys, Bobby, is struck by a car and killed. He wakes up in hell, where the devil tells him he'll be there forever because he died in his sins.

The next day, Tommy tells his mother that if they had listened to their parents, Bobby would still be alive, but at least, he says, his friend Bobby is in heaven. "No," his mother corrects him, "Bobby isn't in heaven." She explains that although Bobby had been one of her favorite students in Sunday School, he had refused to repent and give his life to Jesus. She tells Tommy that because Bobby didn't take salvation seriously and didn't believe the right way, he will spend eternity in hell.

"But that's not right," Tommy tells his mother. "Bobby was a good kid." His mother replies that it's wrong to think that good boys go to heaven just because they're good. "We're all sinners and deserve eternal punishment," she insists. "The only way any of us gets to heaven is through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. You need to accept and believe this in order to get into heaven."

This is a faith grounded in fear and legalism rather than love.

This fear takes several forms, in addition to the fear of spending eternity in hell. One of these is the fear of the world. Despite the fact that legalistic Christianity frequently quotes, “God so loved the world,” the world is considered a dangerous place, and separation from the world is emphasized.

Of course, the world can be a dangerous place. There is evil in the world and in our lives. In fact, the worst evil is often done in the name of good. What happened on September 11 is a constant reminder of that. But the way to deal with evil is not to separate ourselves from the world. We have to name the evil, resist it, and overcome it with God’s help. We can and must do this because, as the Apostle Paul wrote, “Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

I am convinced that some parents who insist on homeschooling their children do so in an attempt to protect them from what they believe to be the secular, humanistic influences of public schools. After court-ordered integration of public schools in this country not too many years ago, private Christian schools exploded — not because parents suddenly wanted more religious teaching in the curriculum, but because they didn’t want their children attending school with Black children.

According to legalistic Christianity, the world is full of danger, and the seduction of inclusive rather than exclusive ways of thinking must be avoided. One of the greatest fears is the over-dependence upon one’s own mind and the powers of reason, where too much thinking is substituted for God’s law.

There is also fear in public schools, universities, and many liberal arts colleges of being exposed to new discoveries and theories about the nature of the universe and how it came into existence. Some fear that these new ideas might threaten their faith.

Personally, I embrace new discoveries and theories about the universe and about human beings. They help remind me that all our ideas and conceptions of God and God’s creation are always too small.

Another fear of legalistic religion, as opposed to a faith that supports living and loving life, is the fear of ambiguity — the fear that you don’t have all the answers, the fear that there isn’t a rule or law that will give the specific and right answer in each situation, the fear that there could be more than one path to the truth.

In countless sermons, and in many so-called Christian novels, children are raised to believe that anyone who suggests there may be more than one path to the truth, or that Hindus, Buddhists, and even Unitarians might have valuable ideas, has planted the demon seed of doubt in them.

I believe Jesus taught us not to be afraid of the world because God so loved the world, and not to be afraid of ambiguity or doubt. That’s why our ancestors in the Congregational tradition kept reminding us to remember “that there is always more light and truth to break forth from God’s word.”

Jesus taught that loving the world does not mean we are to embrace all of the world’s values. He taught and lived a new way of looking at the world, a new way of living in it, and a new way

of understanding God's love. That's why I've given this sermon the title, "Looking, Living, and Loving." It's the Christian way of being in this world that God made good.

Take this matter of "looking." Harry Emerson Fosdick liked to say, "There are many ways in which the Christian faith can be described — in terms of its organizations, its doctrines, its ethical principles — but it can also be thought of as a way of looking at things."

We human beings are faced with two things. First, the reality of life as it is, and second, our way of looking at it, our perception, our interpretation. What one person sees as a gift, another sees as a curse. Jesus did his best to help people see God, God's creation, and others from a different perspective. He helped them change their way of looking at things. He often began his teachings with the phrase, "You have heard that it was said of old," and then he would say, "But I say to you …" and give them a new way of seeing things, an alternative perspective.

When a prospective follower came within range of Jesus, they were not asked to subscribe to a set of rules but rather to a new way of seeing things — a new way of seeing money and other possessions, a new way of seeing the Sabbath, a new way of seeing Samaritans, enemies, lepers, outcasts, children, and God. The early followers of Jesus were called "followers of the way." When Jesus healed people of blindness, it was often more than physical blindness.

The Greek word in the Bible that is often translated into English as "repent" literally means "change your way of looking at things." That's what it means to be born again. It is to have a new way of seeing God, the world, oneself, and others.

If, for example, it is your habit to see all or most human beings as people you can't trust or as your potential enemies, then you will behave one way toward them. If, on the other hand, you see the same people as children of God, as being loved by God just as you are, as being created in God's image, as potential friends, then you will treat them in a different way.

When Jesus asked people to get a new way of looking at money and other possessions, he said, "Take heed and beware of covetousness, for a person's life does not consist in the abundance of things they own." The world's way of looking at things is to get as much as possible and hold on to it. Jesus said, "Learn to let go. Learn to be giving."

The end product of any religious faith in any age is the daily life that its followers live. "You will know them by their fruits," said Jesus. He never said anywhere, "You will know them by their right doctrine."

You and I have to cope with day-by-day circumstances that cannot be anticipated in detail but that will surely challenge the best in us. For those who believe in God as Jesus revealed God, we have an outlook based on trust — a trust that there is meaning and purpose beyond our fragmentary knowledge and events. Faith or trust in God means trust in life itself, despite the patches of meaninglessness that sometimes drive us to the edge of despair.

Thus, belief in a God of love that cannot be overcome by any circumstance is more than belief in God. It is an attitude, a way of looking at life, a way of living and loving your life. Each day, you face new challenges, problems, and joys. You have only limited control over the facts and over many of the forces that surround you, but you have great control over your way of seeing them — your attitude toward them. That is your choice.

I'm going to be very personal as I conclude this sermon on looking, living, and loving. I didn't originally choose to be a follower of the way, a Christian. I was brought up in a Christian family and was active in a local congregation from childhood on. For this, I am very grateful. It continues to be a beautiful gift given to me. I hope you are giving this gift to your children and those around you.

However, here's why I continue to follow the Christian way. It's not because I think God is going to reward me for it. It's not because I believe God will give me a ticket to eternity that God denies to those who do not follow the Christian way. And it's not because I believe God will give me everything I want and solve all my problems.

I, and I hope you, continue to follow the Christian way because I continue to be overwhelmed by the love and forgiveness of God that Jesus taught and lived. Therefore, I know that God loves non-Christians every bit as much as God loves me. I also know that there are many "Christlike" people in our society who would describe their spiritual journey in a different way. You can tell they are Christlike by the way they live. They feed the hungry, comfort the afflicted, clothe the naked, and visit those who are sick and in prison. It was Jesus who said, "As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it unto me."

I continue to follow the Christian way because it tells me daily that even when I am sinful, God loves me and forgives me. And because I know that, I struggle not to be sinful.

I continue to follow the Christian way because I know it is not a game of cosmic favoritism. It's a way of looking at the world, living in the world, and loving God and neighbor. Amen.