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 of the

creation and of 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 what love is. "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 elemental and 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 in which there are the saved and the lost, and nothing in between.

In this kind of religious practice, believing the right doctrines and using the right words to express your

faith is more important than living a life of love. Believe the right way or go to hell. What you believe is more important than what you do.

Here's the kind of story that is used in some of the legalistic Christian Sunday School curriculum material. Three little boys, Tommy and his two friends, Bobby and Billy go out on Halloween against their parent's wishes, to trick and treat. They get frightened by actors dressed up as demons and witches at a simulated haunted house and run into the street to escape them. 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 then goes on to explain that Bobby who has been one of her favorite students in Sunday School, had refused to repent and give his life to Jesus. She said that when she explained to him that salvation was only possible through the right kind of belief in Jesus, he didn't take it seriously, so now 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 and

bad boys to hell. "That's a lie straight from the devil," she insists. "We're all sinners and thus all deserve eternal punishment; the only way any of us get 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 fear of the world. Despite the fact that legalistic Christianity frequently quotes, "God so loved the world," the world is considered to be a very

dangerous and evil place. So dangerous, in fact, that 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 always done in the name of the good. What happened on September 11, one year ago 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 and with God's help resist it and overcome it We can and are to do this because we believe 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 "home-schooling" their children do so in an attempt to protect them from what they believe to be the secular humanistic influences of the 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 a

place full of temptation, competing religious ideas and the seduction of inclusive rather than exclusive ways of thinking. Some of the forces to be most feared and which are the playground of the devil are: an over dependence upon one's own mind, and the powers of reason, where too much thinking is substituted for God's law.

Also in public schools and especially universities and many liberal arts colleges, there is the fear of being exposed to new discoveries and theories about the nature of the universe and how it came into existence. There is a fear of having one's faith threatened.

I don't know about you, but I welcome new discoveries and theories about the universe and about human beings. They help remind me that all of our ideas and conceptions of God and of God's creation are always too small.

Another fear of legalistic religion as opposed to a faith which supports living and loving life, is the fear of ambiguity, the fear that you do not have all the answers, the fear that there is not a rule or law which 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 as the theme of

numerous so-called Christian novels, children are to be raised to believe that anyone who tells them that there may indeed be more than one path to the truth, that Hindus and Buddhists and even Unitarians might have a good idea or two, 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, not to be afraid of doubt. That's why our ancestors in the Congregational tradition kept telling us to remember "that there is always more light and truth to break from God's word."

Jesus taught us that to love the world as God so loved 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 it and 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 which 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."

All of life consists of two elements: first, the facts; second, our way of looking at them, our perception, our interpretation. What one person sees as a gift, another person sees as a curse. Jesus did his best to help people see God, God's creation and others from a different perspective. He tried to help them change their way of looking at things. He began many of 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 he would give them a new way of seeing things, an alternative perception.

When a prospective follower came within range of Jesus, he or she was not asked to subscribe to a

formal creed. The person was asked to get a new way of seeing things; a new way of seeing money and other possessions, a new way of seeing the Sabbath, of seeing Samaritans, of seeing enemies, a new way of seeing lepers, outcasts, children and God. The early followers of Jesus were called "followers of the way." When Jesus healed people of blindness, it was more than physical blindness.

The Greek word in the Bible which 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.

It makes all the difference in your life. 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 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 he or she owns." 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 which the 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 which cannot be anticipated in detail, but which 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 a meaning and purpose beyond our fragmentary knowledge and events. Faith or trust in God means trust in life itself, despite the patches of meaninglessness which sometimes drive us to the edge of despair.

Thus you see, 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 a limited control over the facts and over many of the forces which surround you, but you have a very large control over your way of seeing them, your attitude toward them. That is your

ultimate freedom which no one can take from you. Only you can give it away.

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 love me more than God loves non-Christians. 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, 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'm 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.