

“The Rest Is Commentary”

The scriptures this week are strange in that they are all kind of preachy and somewhat churchy. They are about rules of being saved from God’s wrath, how to live your life, or how to treat challenging members.

The passage from Matthew is the prime example. The first thing that Matthew has Jesus saying is “If another member of the church sins against you...” What is wrong with that statement? More specifically what is wrong with having Jesus make that statement? It is the word “church.” What is problematic about having Jesus talk about the church? The simple answer is that there was no church at that time. Remember that Jesus and all of his disciples were Jews. Matthew is putting that word into Jesus’ mouth because he wants to make a point to **his** church. A group of people that have come together as a faith community some fifty or more years after Jesus’ death and resurrection. The point Matthew has Jesus making about how to deal with internal problems in a group of believers may indeed have come from Jesus’ mouth, but he would never have made a point about *ekklesia* or the church because it did not exist. Indeed, Jesus’ ministry was not about forming a church, but rather, he even said, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”¹ He is a Jew primarily preaching and teaching to his fellow Jews. He is a reformer of Judaism. It was his followers who later began churches because believers in Jesus had become unwelcome in synagogues.

The follower who did a lot of what today we would call church planting was St. Paul. Despite being a devout Jew and a Pharisee his greatest success was with proselytizing Gentiles. In fact, many historians believe that without St. Paul Christianity would have remained a tiny sect within Judaism rather than one of the great world religions with 2.2 billion followers today.

St. Paul was a success at spreading Christianity in the ancient Mediterranean world. He was also an avid letter writer to the congregations that he planted. Often the letters were dealing with problems that the congregations were having. The Letter to the Romans was different. He had not planted a church there but rather was planning on visiting them. The letter was to prepare the Romans for his visit. These were people he had not met, but was eager to meet and encourage and strengthen in their faith in Christ Jesus.

In the section we heard read today Paul is saying something different from he usually says. In his other letters he usually emphasizes the importance of grace, God’s free gift of mercy and forgiveness given to all who believe in Jesus Christ. In conjunction with the emphasis on grace he downplays the law. That is the Torah and observance of the commandments given in the Hebrew Scriptures. However, in this portion of the letter he does not downplay or even deny the importance of the commandments. Instead he actually spends time reciting several of the Ten Commandments to the church in Rome including not to commit adultery or murder, and not to covet or steal. Then he says that what sums up all of the commandments is to “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Indeed, he says that Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. This is a curious turn for a man who is usually trying to point out that the law is no longer important because of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Why be worried about fulfilling the law if it is not important?

¹ Matthew 15:24

I expect that the congregation in Rome may have been more Jewish than most of the congregations that he had planted. He wants these Jewish converts to feel that they have not given up on the traditional teachings of their faith but have extended them and are fulfilling them in their new following of Christ. He is giving them comfort in knowing that all is good with their soul. Their new life in Christ is deepening their faith.

In other words, Paul is doing what any good preacher does which is to meet his listeners where they are. His Gentile listeners need to know that they do not have to become Jews to be followers of Jesus. His Jewish listeners need to know that their Jewish faith was not a waste of time, but an entryway into their current faith.

That is good teaching for them, but what about us who are in a different milieu altogether? What can we take away from the Epistle to the Romans? Perhaps it is what comes in the second part of the reading when Paul says, "For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers." When we first became believers each of us was enthusiastic and excited for our newfound faith. As time goes by we may become comfortable or even blasé about our faith. We wear our faith like we wear our old weekend knock about clothes. It is comfy but not what we put on when we mean business. Because our faith does not hold the same excitement as it did when first experienced it we pay it no mind. Paul warns us that when we get in this place our faith may slacken. Think of what you do in those comfy clothes that you would not do in your Sunday go to meeting clothes. Thus we may fall into reveling and drunkenness, debauchery and licentiousness, or quarreling and jealousy. We must protect ourselves from sinking into these very human and egotistical ways. To prevent that he says that we "put on the Lord Jesus Christ."

Given that Jesus is not a set of clothes what does it mean to put on Jesus. It is to do as Jesus calls us to do which is to lose ourself so that we may save ourself. This most Christian of all conundrums is the key. When we live in Jesus as Jesus lived and taught we are putting his teaching on and wearing it like our best suit of clothes or our most elegant gown. It is a uniform that reminds us and others that we have given ourselves over to something greater than the provision of our flesh.

When we have put on the Lord Jesus Christ we live honorably. We live as in the light of do. We may be tempted to do dishonorable things, but we do not give into that temptation because the life of Christ is in us and on us. It is a life rich in joys and in love. Especially the love for one's neighbor and the love for God. That is the essence of what we call the Great Commandment or better the Great Commandments which is to love God with all you heart and all your mind and to love our neighbor as ourselves. That is the essence of Jesus' teaching. As some waggish scholars have said the rest of scripture is just commentary.

Each morning as you dress for the day whatever you pick from the closet make sure you always put on the Lord Jesus Christ as well. That is the uniform that will help you through each day in love for neighbor and that will fulfill all that God asks of you in this one precious life you have been granted.