

“Thank You for Your Time; Thank You for Your Interest”

Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost; September 6, 2020

As aftermath Hurricane Laura’s destruction unfolded last week, the “boat people” once again became first responders of the first order. As the waters rose and the panic grew, those with boats were the heroes.

Boat people came to the rescue. The Coast Guard, National Guard, sheriff departments, fire departments, commercial and recreational boating businesses, individuals with power



boats, bass boats, row boats, kayaks and canoes, and the “Cajun Navy” — they all put themselves out and into the water to come to the aid of the thousands of people suddenly stranded by the flooding caused by one of the biggest single day rainfall in American history. Countless lives were saved, pets were rescued, misery was given hope by the grace and goodness of heroic “boat people” who worked or waded their way into this unfolding disaster with its alligator and snake-infested waters.

Hurricane Laura turned many unsung “boat people” into heroes.

This same week, in the midst of hearing about the chaos in Kenosha, the news also reported stories of airline attendants having to receive intensive training to fend-off and protect themselves from abusive, angry people who don't want to comply with safety protocols



and procedures. It seems that people's behavior has gotten worse and worse over the past months.

All of which leads us to our scripture lesson from St. Paul's letter to the Romans. The church at Rome was far from being a "safe zone" from persecution or problems. And yet Paul felt compelled to emphasize that those who follow Jesus are to "owe no one anything, except the debt of mutual love." When danger looms, be it rising flood waters or an angry, fearful culture, the only "debt" we owe to others is the debt to "love one another" — no matter whom the "other" may be. No flood waters can rise higher than our conviction to love our neighbors as ourselves. That's the challenge Jesus invokes to all his followers.

Who would have thought that concerns about fellow Americans lashing out at airline attendants on domestic flights would be as much a concern for the industry as terrorism? Who wants to pick a fight when you're in a metal tube flying at 500 miles an hour, 30,000 feet in the air? But that's our current reality.

And yet, it's not exactly a "new" reality. Back in 1994, a nasty dispute between an air carrier's in-flight air attendants and in-the-cockpit pilots came to a head in one particular flight. Both sides were already loaded with mistrust and anger. On this fateful flight, the pilots issued an emergency announcement to the rest of the crew and the passengers. The right engine had failed, they said, and the plane was being redirected to the nearest airport.

Looking out the windows in the body of the plane, it was obvious to those with a view that the "right" engine was fine. The LEFT engine was the one that was smoking. But instead of informing the cockpit, the flight attendants snickered among themselves, mocking the stupidity of the pilots. The passengers sided with the flight attendants, murmuring about how bad the pilots were. As the Federal Aviation Administration's

inquiry into the incident later determined, the aggrieved parties felt it important to bicker and find fault with each other than to just shut down the engine to extinguish the fire. So much for the major problem: they were all in the same plane and an engine was on fire. But pride proceeds the fall, right?

The flight engineers and pilots, the flight attendants, the passengers all were so fixated on their own grievances and committed to their own agendas that they completely forgot the most important thing. If the plane crashed, they were all going down together. Opinions didn't matter whether the problem was on the "right" or the "left." They shared a common destiny, but despite themselves, the plane eventually landed and none were the wiser. It's a true story from the May 31, 1994 edition of *The Washington Post*. It could also be a parable for this era of COVID-19. Parables are usually left for subjective interpretation, so we'll leave it at that.



In his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" (April 13, 1963), Martin Luther King Jr. wrote: "I am cognizant of the

interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” You don’t have to be on the same plane, or in the same boat, to feel the impact of those words: “Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

King wrote that 57 years ago and some people are still none the wiser.

Jesus’s command to “love one another” (John 15:12, reiterating Leviticus 19:18) isn’t just a “command,” it’s also a reveal. For those who are truly inhabited by the spirit of the living God, love shouldn’t be difficult. “Agape” love, that is selfless love, love for the other, is having the same experience of love and regard for those outside of ourselves as we have for ourselves.

A slow, thoughtful reading of “the Greatest Commandment” will reveal very clearly what Jesus says in commentary of Leviticus and the

“kingdom prayer” from Deuteronomy 6:4. Here’s the passage from Mark 12:28-31:

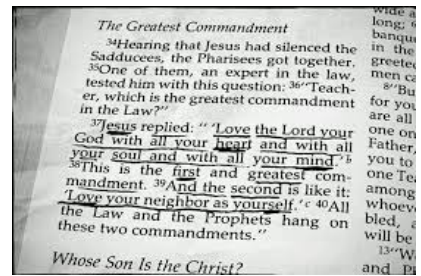
One of the legal experts came up, and overheard the discussion. Realizing that Jesus had given a splendid answer, he put a question of his own. “Which commandment”, he asked, “is the first one of all?”

“The first one,” replied Jesus, “is this: ‘Listen, Israel: the Lord your God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your understanding, and with all your strength.’ And this is the second one: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ No other commandment is greater than these ones.”

Did you catch that? “*No other commandment is greater than these.*” Not “some other commandment is greater or just as great” but “*NO other commandment is greater...*” This is just as true every other day of the week as it is on Sunday. No stipulations. We may not necessarily agree with the Lord at every given moment. Why? Because “the LORD is our God, the LORD alone” which means God is God and we’re not. There’s no way for people to weasel themselves out of this truth.

“You shall love the LORD your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” is in reality the flip of the same coin: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The scripture allows

no room for us to separate our relationship with God from our relationship with each other, with Jesus even extending the definition of “neighbor” to include “enemy” (Matthew 5:44). That’s often one of the more disagreeable points we may have with the Lord, but that’s not his problem. The problem is ours. We live out our union and communion with our creator, not just in safe cocoons — but in the streets and corridors, websites, and other venues of life where wounded, fearful humanity is.



I once read that when coins were still made out of precious metals, people used to debase the currency through “coin-clipping” or shaving. The debaser would snip off a piece of say, gold or silver — and after collecting a certain amount, the debaser would then melt it down to sell. When someone “shaves-off” either side of the Great Commandment, they have debased the coinage of the gospel. A debased gospel will mouth-off a call for Christians to “love God,” but will make excuses for treating their neighbors shabbily. A debased gospel will mouth-off a call

for Christians to “love their neighbor” while ignoring those who are created in the same divine image as you and me. This is heresy.

Coin-clippers back in the day were considered just as bad as counterfeiters. The Romans would either cut-off a coin-clipper’s fingers or head, depending on the magistrate’s mood. Those who clip away from either side of the Great Commandment basically lock themselves into a prison of loneliness, anger, hatred, and unforgivingness which may last for eternity.



Selfless, “agape” love — whether or not the “boat-people” of Louisiana and other places understand religious language — is what has been seen in abundance amidst the destruction. From the looks of it, love is something that will need to be lavished upon lots of people for many years to come. “Agape” love is steadfast. As St. Paul reminds us: “Love is great-hearted; love is kind, knows no jealousy, makes no fuss, is not puffed up, no shameless ways. Love doesn’t force its rightful claim, doesn’t rage or bear a grudge, doesn’t cheer at others’ harm. Love rejoices, rather, in the truth...Love never fails” (1 Corinthians 13:4-8).

Love never fails. Let us pray that we will never fail love.

In Romans Paul reminds us that the kingdom is not distant, but ever on our shoulder. “Our salvation, you see, is nearer now than it was when first we came to faith.” That’s always a true statement, and it should be the staff that guides us forward, even through deep water. Christians are commanded to extend their hearts and hands toward those who are need, because there’s something to live for that God has promised. We don’t give in. We don’t give up. We don’t go back. We go forward. We pay forward.

And when we do, we experience that “Double Thank You Moment” that so essential for the healing of our nation. What’s a “double thank you?” It’s simply this:

What do you do when you receive a beverage from a waiter or clerk at the drive-thru window? Do you just take it and guzzle it down? Or do you say, “Thank you”? And does the server just shove it at you to get on to the next person? Sometimes, probably. Makes you wonder what suffering is going on in his or her life. But more than likely the server will say, “Thank you.” Saying “Thank you” for



something you paid for, and saying “Thank you” to someone who just received something they purchased, is a mundane yet wonderful courtesy. And one that should be well kept, especially when gratitude seems low and anxiety high.

So let’s review: You buy a beverage. You get your beverage. You say, “Thank you.” The server also says, “Thank you.” It’s a “double thank you.” Most of us are quite traditional when it comes simple courtesies. Let us hold on to holy ground by refusing to give them up. The people of God shouldn’t be tempted to give an inch when it comes to virtue. Do you remember when news interviews, no matter how at odds or strained, no matter how much tension between the interviewer



and the interviewee, no matter opposing viewpoints — they both said, “Thank you” at the end of the interview? “Thank you for your time.” “Thank you for your interest.” There

was respect and courtesy for the other.

The “Double Thank-You” moment is a powerful one that can be measured chemically in our bodies. We get an adrenaline rush from a

“double thank you.” It’s one expression of Jesus’s reveal to “love one another.” It’s a true moment of union and communion. The “double thank you” acknowledges that we’re all inter-related, we’re all connected, and we all share a common destiny, whether in the same plane or in the same boat.

If you want to get the gist of what’s going on in any Christian’s head and heart, don’t necessarily listen to what they say (and certainly not just to what a preacher says!), but watch what they do and how they treat other people.

Let the “Double Thank You Moments” of Hurricane Laura’s “boat people” keep our feet to the fires and floods of our neighborhoods, our nation, and our world.

Remember that you are people of the one, true God who love the divine image.

Thank you for your time this morning. Thank you for your

interest.

Amen.

