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The National Presbyterian Church

The Day is Coming

Romans 12 and 13

Rev. Earl F. Palmer

C.S. Lewis had a young friend that was returning to the United States from Oxford and Sheldon Vanauken in his book *A Severe Mercy* tells about that parting as he was saying goodbye to Lewis and saying "I'm going to the United States now." And they were walking across High Street in Oxford, Lewis having heard the young man say, "Goodbye, I'm going to go now and take care." Lewis shouted across High Street, "No, not goodbye. Besides, Christians never say goodbye."¹ And these were the final words of Lewis to Sheldon Vanauken shouted across High Street. It's true, we never say goodbye as Christians. And you know Seattle is very close. It's the other Washington. It's only 3,000 miles away. Shirley and I are going to return to that Washington, but you know, this church is in our hearts and we just have so enjoyed every minute here. Thank you, thank you very, very much for your friendship and just the way you have become our friends and what a joy to watch this church and to watch the fine ministry of this church to children and families and people of all ages.

It won't be long you know, you have a pastor search committee that is searching, and it won't be long probably that they will be able to present a candidate as the new senior pastor of this marvelous congregation. And then this congregation will move forward into another and new chapter. Now if you welcome, and if you pray for your new pastor, the way you have welcomed and prayed for me, then I know in my heart that the best years lie ahead for this great church. This is a strong and exciting congregation, I can attest to that. And this year and a half has proved it to me and I look forward to hearing and watching what God is going to do in this congregation in the years ahead. God bless you.

This is the final sermon in our series of messages that we are preaching on St. Paul's letter to the Romans. This is a great letter. I believe it is Paul's most important letter. I think he feels it in his own bones. He writes it from Corinth, he's writing it to the capital of the whole Roman Empire, the largest city of the Roman Empire. He knows people there. In fact, when you get to the 16th Chapter of this book there's a list of 37 names and groups of people whose names are there in that book, in that 16th Chapter. And he knows all these people even though he's not been to Rome yet. And it shows you how the Christians are moving around in the first century

world. And he writes this important letter to them. He makes the case for Christianity in this letter. He especially makes it for the Greek Christians, those who are Gentiles and come to faith. His main concern has been to reach out to them. And he asks questions and then answers them throughout the letter. Like one question after saying, "Where sin increased, the grace of God increased more," then he starts the 6th Chapter by saying, "Well then, shall we sin more to get more grace?" That's a humorous line. But he answers it immediately, "By no means" (Romans 5:20-6:1). In the 8th Chapter he says, "If God is for us, who can be against us? (Romans 8:31). Nero is the emperor so they can think of a lot of people who are against them. It's a very tense time. But then he answers that. Jesus Christ has the last word.

Now in Chapters 12 through 16 I think he's answering another question. It's this question: "Well, if all this is true, if God's grace is so durable, if the gospel is so permanent and the promises of God are non-negotiable, the promises of God are unshakable, if that's true then how are we supposed to live in the world that we're in right now?" In the challenging century that these folks who get this letter, how are they supposed to make it? What are we supposed to do? Paul, do you have a strategy for us as we face our world right now? By the way, we're living a number of centuries later in this 21st century and I think we can ask that same question of St. Paul as we read these final chapters of Romans. Paul, is there a strategy for us today? We live in a challenging century too. There are so many challenges, so many problems, so many opportunities right in front of us. How do we live, how do we share our faith? How do we make it? Do you have a strategy for us? And I believe Paul does. In fact, I want to show you that in Chapter 12 and 13 especially but in 14, 15 and 16 as well, Paul has a strategy for these Christians in the world in which they live.

It starts, Chapter 12, with the love of God. I'm glad it starts there. But listen to how it starts. This is Chapter 12 of Romans, listen. "I appeal to you therefore," by the way there's one joke we always make about the Pauline letters. They're one continuous sentence. He never really stops. It's always 'therefore...', and 'in view of this, and that...', so it's one long continuous sentence. So in Chapter 12 he keeps that up. "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters," it's plural and yet he's also addressing us individually as you'll see, "because of the mercies of God." Now there are several love words in the New Testament. Of course, the greatest is *agape*, you'll hear that later. Also grace, but this word "mercies" means concrete specific acts of love. So it's a concrete word and so the NRSV translates it "mercies". "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, in view of the concrete love of God that you have experienced, that you present your bodies as a living sacrifice" (Romans 12:1). There are two surprises there. We ordinarily think of sacrifices as dead. You think of a little animal that's slain and then the blood is used as a sacrifice in the Jewish tradition. Or you think of cereal sacrifices where you have the harvest, and then you take the first fruits of the harvest and that's your sacrifice. But again, the fruit has been already cut.

But now he surprises you and says, "God does not want you dead, he wants you alive." He's not asking you that you try to think of some heroic thing so that you can be a martyr. No, he wants you alive, a living sacrifice – it's a play on words. It's a surprise. And also he maybe disappoints some of the more spiritual members of the church at Rome when he doesn't say, and "I urge you in light of the love of God to present your *souls*," that's a very wonderful word – the Greeks loved it especially; or your *spirits* – they even love that more and in the Gnostic movement they'll try to spiritualize everything. But he doesn't do that. No this wonderful wholesomeness of St. Paul, of the taking you as a whole person, instead he says "I urge you, because of

the love of God, the concrete love of God, that you present your concrete self. Don't talk about your spiritual self, don't talk about your soul, talk about your body. And the word *soma* is used here, your body. Present your bodies. That means problematic me. That means the part of me that has confusion in it. You heard the Karl Barth prayer. I love that prayer that we spoke together today as our prayer confession, which faces up to the fact that sometimes we believe and sometimes we're having a hard time believing. So present your concrete self a living sacrifice and that's wholly and acceptable to God. It is your spiritual worship.

O Lord our God, you know who we are, those with good consciences and with bad, persons who are content and those who are discontented, the certain and the uncertain, Christians by conviction and Christians by convention, those who believe, those who half-believe, and those who disbelieve. You know where we have come from: from the circle of relatives and friends, or from the greatest loneliness; from a life of quiet prosperity, or from manifold confusion and distress; from relationships well-ordered, or from those disordered or under stress; from the circle of Christian community or from its outer edge. But now we all stand before you in all our differences, yet alike in that we are all wrong with you and with one another, that one day we must die, that we would be lost without your grace, but also in that your grace is promised and made available to us all in your dear Son, Jesus Christ.

Karl Barth, 1886-1968

I interpret that to mean Paul is saying that's what God wants from you. None of this spiritualization of you turning yourself into sort of a phantom. Present your concrete self; the only self you really know is with arms and legs and who you are. Present who you are as your spiritual worship. And then he gives a challenge. "Do not be conformed," by the way, the word here literally in Greek means 'squeezed.' In fact, J.B. Phillips translated this passage, "Don't let the world squeeze you into its own mold. Don't be squeezed by the present passing world. Don't find your meaning from the world around you. Get the meaning for your life from God."² So notice, because of the love of God, we hear a challenge. In fact, Karl Barth translates this passage in his commentary, "Challenge the no-gods, the false gods, challenge this present passing age and don't let it determine who you are." So he says, "Because of the love of God, be not conformed to this passing world but be transformed." And you know, we already ran into this in the fifth chapter because of reconciliation, you know the word *katalidzo* is used there. A catalyst doesn't change itself but it changes us. And Jesus Christ is the great catalyst. He comes into our presence and he changes our lives. He stays who he is, we change. So he says, "Don't be conformed to this world but be transformed, (metamorphosis is the word,) transformed by the renewal of your mind so that you may discover or discern what is the will of God, that it's good, it's acceptable, and it's complete" (Romans 12:2).

And that's how he starts. The strategy of St. Paul starts with you. Not just you alone but you also seeing brothers and sisters around you. That is your discovery of God's love. Your willingness to believe that love and to challenge the no-gods with false love. But he's not finished. Now he moves to the second stage of the strategy, verse 3. "For by the grace given to me (now another love word,) because of God's love given to me, I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment." Sober judgment is the way the NRSV translates this word, *sophrone*. This is a very interesting word. It's the word that's used by Paul in his letter to Timothy where he says, "Timothy, I know all about you, I know that God did not give you a spirit of fear, but he gave you a spirit of love, *agape*, and power and a *healthy mind*" (2 Timothy 1:7). And he used the same word there as here. Here it's translated sober mind. He gave you a healthy

mind. *Phrono* the word for mind which means health or safe, a healthy mind. As you know there's a lot of unhealthiness, especially in religion. A lot of unhealthy things, things that are toxic, and Paul says that's not what God gave you. Don't think more highly of yourself, don't become confused about yourself, have a realistic understanding of yourself and that is possible because of God's grace, God gave you a healthy mind. And notice, he even adds it to faith. A healthy mind each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.

Now he introduces us to the fellowship of the Christian church, of our brothers and sisters.

For as in one body we have many members, arms and legs, so we are many and we are one body. And yet we're individually members one of another. [Now he talks about some gifts we have. In this body, there are gifts just like in 1 Corinthians 12, the gifts of the Holy Spirit.] *We have gifts that differ according to the grace of God given to us. Prophecy, in proportion to faith.* [Paul suggests a small list here.] *Ministers, in ministry. Teachers, in teaching. Exhorters, in exhortation. Givers, in generosity. Leaders, in diligence. The compassionate with cheerfulness* (Romans 12:4-8).

These are gifts. They are gifts given to the body of Christ and that's the second part of his strategy. Notice, the first part addresses us individually seeing that we experience God's love. It starts with God's love that sets us free from the false gods. And then he places us into a family, a fellowship of brothers and sisters in which we have gifts and others have gifts, and notice in this picture we don't all have the same gifts. There are some things one person is good at, some things that other people are good at. When you put them together, we have a body that can work and be supportive of one of another. That's the second part of the strategy, the fellowship that is created by the Holy Spirit, the Christian Church.

The third part of the strategy as I see it from Paul is that he wants us to stay put. Paul does not want these Christians in Rome to run away from Rome. After all, he plans to come there someday and he wants to see them. So he doesn't want them to go down to the coastal countryside, he doesn't want them to go up to Geneva because they need the cooler air. He doesn't want them to go anywhere else, he wants them to stay in Rome as dangerous a city as Rome is. He wants them to stay where they are. And that is the third part of his strategy, to stay. I call it the strategy of presence. God wants your presence there in your family. He wants you so you can be found. He wants your presence in the church. He wants your presence in the city of Washington D.C. Your presence, stay put. But notice how he puts it. How are we to stay? Listen to these next words, they're wonderful. So he says, "Let love be genuine, hate what's evil, hold fast to what's good." Stay realistically and wisely with a healthy head. Love one another with mutual affection. Outdo one another in showing honor." notice these are all present tenses. In Chapters 13 he speaks plainly to these Christians and urges them to not leave the city of Rome itself. "Pay your taxes." Live as a servant of Christ where you are here and now. "Do not lag in zeal. Be ardent in spirit. Serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope. Be patient in suffering. Persevere in prayer." All present tense words. Where you are now, do these things. Contribute to the needs of the saints. That's the brothers and sisters in the fellowship, and then get this. "Extend hospitality to strangers" (Romans 12:9-13).

Already Paul is teaching them to reach out, to have a presence that reaches out and welcomes in strangers, the foreigners, the person that doesn't know who you are. But it's right there, it's the ministry of presence. He goes on. "Bless those who

persecute you." See, it shows he doesn't want them to go to a place where there is no persecution. He does not want them to run away. He wants these Christians to, "Bless those who persecute you. Bless, do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice. Weep with those who weep." As you know, some people can't stand to be around people who are hurting and so they want to get away from hurting people as best they can. Put them in a hospital and let me forget them. But Paul says, "I want you to weep with those who weep, and I want you to rejoice with those who rejoice." Then you'll know who's rejoicing so that you can rejoice with them. You'll know who's weeping so you can weep with them. So rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. "Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty. Associate with the lowly" (Romans 12:14-16).

You know, St. Paul was able to relate to aristocrats, he was himself from an aristocratic family. And he is able to relate to slaves. Did you know in the Roman world slaves were considered sub-human? But not for Paul. Paul routinely uses the word slave, *doulos*, to refer to himself. Our Lord did also. And so Paul has great success with slaves. In fact, did you know that in the 16th Chapter of Romans, which is like the New York phone directory, with all these names that are listed, F. F. Bruce the great scholar researched the names in Chapter 16 and he found that possibly a quarter of the names were slave names. He's addressing people in Rome, and he knows them by name and they're slaves that he met down at Ephesus or he met them over at Corinth. And there they are, they work for some family or something like that and they're there and so he knows them. He won them to Christ. Ironically you know, the slaves in the first century world were the intellectuals of the first century world too. For most wealthy families, the teachers of their youth were slaves. So he knew them. But they're considered lowly. So he says, "Associate with the lowly. Do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible insofar as it depends on you, live peaceably with all" (Romans 12:17-18).

So there's the second strategy. Stay put. Use the gifts that God gives you. You don't have everything, and he has this list of gifts that differ from person to person; some have the gift of hospitality more than others. Some can weep better than others can weep, others are better at rejoicing. Do what you can do. Stay in the fellowship and with the fellowship you can play that role. Let me tell you a little story. When I was at Berkeley from 1970 to '91, I was pastor of the Berkeley church and in the early years there it was very tense in Berkeley. We had riots and demonstrations in connection with the Vietnam War and other things. And many times the riots would start at Sproul Plaza and then they would spill over and come down our street. But one time, one was an especially caustic time when a radiation lab car which belonged to the University of California because that's the radiation lab of the University of California, but a car came and some rioters kicked it over on Bancroft Avenue and put it afire. And of course, the fire department came and there it was burning and that was very tense. From then on the University of California took the inscriptions radiation lab off their cars that were radiation lab cars. But on this occasion another radiation lab car was tipped over in front of our church, First Presbyterian Church right there on the corner of Dana and Channing. And I was there and the fire department came, it was not on fire. There was gas spreading all over in the street and the fireman from the Berkeley fire department came and they were spraying foam all over this and it was wonderful to see them there. Except that something bad happened.

While they were spraying foam there were a bunch of rioters who came up and

they started throwing rocks at the Berkeley Fire Department guys. The thing that made me so upset was that these fire department guys would do mouth-to-mouth resuscitation for any one of those rioters if they got into distress. And that's the guys they're throwing rocks at. And I was, I was so upset. And I stood there watching as some guys were throwing rocks at these fire department men who were trying to make sure this car didn't go afire. And one young man was standing near me and he picked up a rock and was about to throw it, and I don't know, I decided to, you know we all have different gifts. I have a gift, I'm the pastor of First Presbyterian Church, so I said to this rioter, "Take that rock and throw it down, you're not going to throw that rock. I'm the pastor of this church and that's church property and you're not going to throw it." I said, "You're not going to throw a First Presbyterian Church of Berkeley rock at those firemen! Put that rock down!" And I just said it firmly to this young man. And he kind of laughed, and then smiled, threw the rock down and then he said to me, "I used to be a pacifist myself." But anyway he didn't throw that rock.

And I got to thinking about it. That is what Paul's talking about using your gifts. You have different gifts. Paul had gifts that he could use. One of his gifts was he was from the aristocracy. He was a Roman citizen by birth, that's a rare thing. Paul had wealth; his sister could help him get out of his difficulty in Jerusalem because she knew the Roman Legate. Paul knew language very well. It helped him. Paul is able to use his advantages and that was his advantage. His brilliance is an advantage for Paul. He used his disadvantages. His imprisonments. How do you think Paul had time to write letters? Because he was in prison, and he couldn't just be traveling around like he wanted to do. So he had to write letters and the best letters we have of St. Paul are the prison letters. So in a way, use the gift you've got. You don't have every gift. You can't reach everybody. But there's somebody you can reach. You have some authority. I was pastor of that church. I could make sure they weren't going to steal one of our rocks to throw at a fireman. And I told him that. He threw it down. Use your gift. Stay, stay put. Be there and use the gift you have. But Paul still has two more strategies.

The next strategy comes up in the next set of lines. "So insofar as it depends on you, live peaceably. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God." Let God be the judge in other words. "For it is written: 'Vengeance is mine. I will repay,' says the Lord." We live in a just universe, finally because God is judge. "No, 'if your enemies are hungry, feed them.'" Wow, what a surprise. "If they are thirsty, give them drink. For by so doing you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:18-21). And that's the fourth strategy of St. Paul. Introduce a new ingredient into an ancient crisis. Your old crises, put a new ingredient in. Do you know that people, who are acting out in a high school or are acting out with anger in fistfights and all, are usually hungry? Hungry for ideas, hungry for something better than what they now have. Kids that use drugs are really starved. Drugs aren't what they need. They need something that is substantial. People need food. They need water. Spiritually they need it. People who are angry are usually hurting. Feed them. That's Paul's strategy. Find something they need, do it. Do it with wit and with skill. "Don't be overcome with evil, overcome evil with good." Good is stronger. And then he says, "When you do that you'll heap coals on their heads."

By the way, I've heard interpreters use that text and say, if you do that act of kindness then God will judge them for sure. No, that misunderstands the text. That's from Proverbs 25:21-22, where Proverbs says, "If your enemy is hungry, feed him

... that will put coals of fire on his head.” Do you know in a Bedouin society how would you start your fire in your campsite? You’re in with a bunch of people in the Bedouin camp, how do you get a fire started? In fact, I used to watch Survivor, the so-called reality show on CBS, my kids all wanted to watch it so I watched it for a long time. I figured out the only interesting thing in Survivor was watching them try to start their fires. That’s really the only interesting thing in Survivor. And finally CBS had to issue flints and all kinds of tricks to get them to start their fires because nobody could start a fire. In Boy Scouts you learn that first off how to start a fire. They didn’t know how to do it. It’s very difficult to start a fire. Very difficult. And if you’re in a Bedouin society living out in the desert how do they start a fire? You know how you start a fire? You go to a neighbor and say, “Can I borrow some of your coals, and I’ll bring them over to start my fire?”

Now let me ask you the big question. How do you carry coals? Do you get a Safeway bag and put it in the Safeway bag and carry it? It’ll burn right through the bag. Do you take it and put it in the pot and hold it by your stomach? It’ll burn your stomach. Do you know how you carry coals? It’s the same way in the Middle East you carry water. The right way to carry water and that’s why the posture of people in the Middle East is so good. You put it on your head. Then your weight goes straight through your body. That’s true in mountaineering you know. The first rule in mountaineering is that you must have the weight go through your body. Not in the front or not in the back. A packsack has got to put the weight through your body, not pull you back or push you forward. And in the Middle East they carry huge amounts of water. They put a little pad on the top of their head, they put the jug on the top of their head and then they balance it, and they walk in precarious places carrying water. And guess how they carry coals. The same way. A pad, be sure you have the pad, then the stone jar with the coals, your neighbor gives you some coals. You carry it and start your fire and that’s the proverb. Do an act of kindness to someone who wants fire help then get them fire so they won’t steal your entire camp. And then they’ll have coals on their head and they’ll get their own fire going. This is not a parable of judgment. It’s a parable of grace. A new ingredient is being added to an ancient problem. You’ve got people who are hungry for ideas. Give them some ideas that are valid. People who are hungry for love, give them love, they need it.

And then he has one more. The last one comes in the 13th Chapter. He says, *Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery; You should not murder; You should not steal; You shall not covet; any other commandment are summed up in this word, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to the neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law”* [Paul is quoting Matthew 22, the text we just heard read from our Lord Jesus Christ. And then listen to this. Talk about a surprise.] *Besides this, Paul says, you know that what time it is now.* [You know. I expect Paul to say, “You know, it’s about dark, we got a dark, night ahead of us for sure, the darkness of the fall of Jerusalem’s going to occur in about five years. No one knows it yet, but 70 A.D. the fall of Jerusalem a lot of dark things are going to happen in the Roman world. Terrible things are going to happen in the Roman world. And he doesn’t say, “Now get ready for the dark, get ready for the terrible hours that are come.” Paul does not say that. Listen.] *Besides this, you know what time it is, it’s now the moment for you to be awake, wide-awake. For salvation is nearer to you than it was when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light* (Romans 13:8-12).

Paul doesn't put a dark rim around history; he puts a light rim around history. There is light that's coming. Did you know that light is stronger than dark? Did you know that love is stronger than hate? Did you know that good is stronger than evil? And Paul believes that. He counts on it. And that's his fifth strategy. To count on the victory of love, the victory of light over darkness. And then invest yourself in the light. Amen. God bless you.

Heavenly Father, thank you for this text. Thank you that it's for me, it's for each of us as we live our lives in a city like Washington D.C. or a city like Seattle, or wherever we live. Help us to stay where we are and play the role we're supposed to play, and to share your love and your light in this world and then to trust you and to trust that your love is stronger - that where sin increased, the grace of God increased faster. Lord, help us to trust this promise in Christ's name we pray, Amen.

1 Vanauken, Sheldon. *A Severe Mercy*. HarperOne, 1987.

2 Phillips, J.B. *The New Testament in Modern English*. Touchstone, 1996.

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Sunday Worship at 8, 9:15 & 11 a.m.
Classes for Adults, Youth, and Children at 9:15 a.m.

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