

September 7, 2014

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Educated by Love”

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Romans 13:8-14

8 Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. 9 The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." 10 Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. 11 Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; 12 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; 13 let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. 14 Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

“Educated by Love”

Romans 13:8-14

William Deresiewicz is worried about the state of college education. Like many us, he is concerned about the cost, but what worries him even more are the values elite colleges are instilling in their students.

In an article in the *New Republic* magazine entitled “Don’t Send Your Kid to the Ivy League,” Deresiewicz reflects on his two and a half decades in Ivy League institutions. He claimed he went off to college “like a sleepwalker.” He chose the most prestigious school to which he was accepted, hoping to achieve some vague ideals of success. But after he’d gotten multiple degrees from Columbia and spent time on the faculty of Yale, he began to ask questions because of what he saw in the students he taught.

“I taught many wonderful young people during my years in the Ivy League,” he writes, “bright, thoughtful, creative kids whom it was a pleasure to talk with and learn from. But most of them seemed content to color within the lines...Very few were passionate about ideas...[and if you] look beneath the facade of seamless well-adjustment...what you often find are toxic levels of fear, anxiety, and depression, of emptiness and aimlessness and isolation...”

He goes on: “So extreme are the admission standards now that kids who manage to get into elite colleges have, by definition, never experienced anything but success. The prospect of *not* being successful terrifies them, disorients them. The cost of falling short, even temporarily, becomes not merely practical, but existential...Once, a student...told me that she’d love to have a chance to think about the things she’s studying, only she doesn’t have the time. I asked her if she had ever considered not trying to get an A in every class. She looked at me as if I had made an indecent suggestion...[Another] told me that a friend of hers had left Yale because she found the school ‘stifling to the parts of yourself that you’d call a soul.’”¹

Deresiewicz believes that one reason elite institutions fail to nourish the souls of its students is because of their lack of true diversity. Of course, all of these schools claim to be diverse, and certainly the racial diversity on many

¹ William Deresiewicz, “Don’t Send Your Kid to the Ivy League.” *New Republic*, July 21, 2014. <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/118747/ivy-league-schools-are-overrated-send-your-kids-elsewhere>

campuses is much better than fifty years ago. But the socioeconomic diversity is, if anything, worse. Statistics show that a significant majority of students in elite institutions come from the upper and upper middle class. For these students, getting to know someone whose background and experiences are significantly different from theirs has become yet another means to an end, another line on a crowded resume.

In today's passage from his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul writes about community, how people from different backgrounds with vastly different experiences can come together and get to know one another in a real and authentic way. Reflecting on the Ten Commandments, laws given by God to Moses and by Moses to God's people, laws pored over and analyzed by religious scholars in every age, Paul offers a five-word summary: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

In other words, fulfilling the law is not about living by a strict set of rules and then dividing ourselves by who follows them and who doesn't. Fulfilling the law is about loving others, putting concern for the welfare of others ahead of or at the very least on par with the concern we have for ourselves.

Brene Brown is a sociology professor at the University of Houston whose research focuses on vulnerability, courage, worthiness, and shame. She recently wrote about the instinctual reaction we all have when confronted with a stranger's pain and suffering: we want to turn away.

The problem, she says, is that in order to justify turning away from another's pain, we first tell ourselves that we are somehow *better than* they are. We tell ourselves that it is our willpower or our strength of character that prevents us from being the one revealing to the world our desperation and brokenness. But turning away to protect ourselves is a choice born of fear. Brown offers a different choice: courage. "Rather than deny our vulnerability," she writes, "[we can] lean into both the beauty and agony of our shared humanity." Choosing courage instead of fear matters because through our choices we either make the world a more dangerous place or we cultivate peace. "Fear and judgment deepen our collective wounds," she writes. "That rare mix of courage and compassion is the balm that brings global healing."²

² <http://brenebrown.com/2014/08/14/choose-courage/>

In this passage, Paul is less concerned with global healing and more focused on helping the small communities that made up the early church — but in other writings he makes clear that these communities could have profound effects on the world. And so he encourages the first followers of Jesus to create and sustain communities built on the love and sacrifice of God in Jesus Christ.

The world around us is full of suffering: Ferguson, ISIS, ebola, Israel/Palestine, poverty, inequality — the list goes on and on. Healthy, meaningful, loving communities like the ones Paul tried to create in the early church might just be the only things that have a chance at healing our world or at least addressing its suffering in a meaningful way.

The question is how? How on earth can our small community at Church of the Covenant come together in a way that actually makes a difference locally and globally?

Paul's answer to that question is three-fold: first, he says, pay attention. "You know what time it is," he writes, "now is the moment for you to wake from sleep." In other words, be present to this time that we're in, don't turn away from the struggles and suffering of others or, for that matter from our personal struggles with illness, relationships, identity, financial stability, addiction.

Paul's second piece of advice is to stop doing the things we do to avoid pain — our own pain and the pain of others. There are all sorts of ways we shield ourselves from suffering. Paul calls them reveling, drunkenness, debauchery, licentiousness, quarreling, jealousy. The specifics might look a little different today, but Paul's list is a pretty good summary of how we turn away from our problems. We numb ourselves, we search desperately for things that make us feel better if only momentarily, and if all else fails, we simply look away.

But there is another way, and this is Paul's third recommendation, and it's a lot like what Brene Brown calls "choosing courage." Paul has different language for it, though. He calls it "putting on the Lord Jesus Christ."

“Put on the Lord Jesus Christ.” In other words, live as children of God by imitating Jesus, who humbled himself — in another letter Paul calls it “emptying himself” — to put on human flesh and live among us. So for us to put on the Lord Jesus Christ means we have to do for others the same thing he did for us: we have to put *our* concerns aside and take on the concerns of those around us. This is what it means to love our neighbor as ourselves.

When Karen and Mondy Stobbe moved from Chicago to North Carolina to care for Karen’s mother, Virginia, who was suffering from Alzheimer’s, they received a lot of advice. Most of this advice was along the lines of trying to help Virginia remember who she was and who they were. But they quickly discovered that this approach more often than not led to conflict. If Virginia wanted a bowl of ice cream and Karen said, “no, Mom, remember, you have diabetes,” Virginia, who didn’t actually remember that she had diabetes, would get angry. If Virginia asked for the hundredth time where she was and Karen explained that this was her home and she (Karen) was her daughter, Virginia, who didn’t recognize this place as her home or this woman as her daughter, would get hopelessly confused and upset.

Finally, one day, exhausted by these recurring battles, Karen sat at the computer and searched for a new set of rules for caring with someone who has Alzheimer’s, hoping she might find something different, something that would help her. At the top of one of the lists were the words “step into their world.”

Now this was a rule Karen understood. She and Mondy were both actors and back in Chicago they had done a lot of improvisational comedy. And the number one rule of improv is “step into their world.” When you walk onstage and another actor says something, no matter how absurd, you don’t deny it or question the premise, you step into their world and say “yes, and...”

So Karen decided to try this approach with her mother. She realized that when she said, “But, Mom, you don’t like pickles” or “But, Mom, you don’t have a sister” or “But, Mom, you can’t go home; this is your home,” she was essentially calling her mother a liar. No wonder it made Virginia angry. But if

Karen responded by stepping into her mother's world and saying "Yes, and, tell me about that..." it opened up a whole new avenue for relationship.

This new plan worked well for Virginia, and it brought peace to their home, but the results were terribly painful for Karen. The world she stepped into each day was a drastically different place than the world Virginia and Karen had previously inhabited as mother and daughter. Because many days, in Virginia's world, she didn't remember that Karen was her daughter.

If Virginia says, "strawberries make me think of home," Karen immediately remembers picking strawberries with her mother and father in Texas where she grew up. But that's not what Virginia is thinking of, so Karen doesn't bring up her own memories. Instead, she says, "Yes, and tell me more about that." It's painful, she says, "because no matter how old you are, you want your mother to talk about you and your experiences and validate your memories." Stepping into her mother's world requires Karen to deny herself, to set aside her foundational identity as the daughter of Virginia. But it is the best way she has found to love her mother.³

God did not give us the law to see who keeps it and who doesn't. God's gave us the law so that we might learn how to fulfill it: by loving one another. The law teaches us how to do this — how to love God and one another — but love is much more than simply following a set of rules. Love is taking the time to get to know one another — really know one another — which requires us to pay attention. Love is being courageous enough to stop numbing ourselves and instead to open ourselves to the suffering within and around us. Love is creating in this place a whole new kind of community, a community where people know God better by taking the time to know one another better and by allowing others to get to know us. Love is a community built on a foundation of empathy, vulnerability, and the willingness to step into the world of another. Together, may we build this church on a foundation of Christ-like love. Amen.

³ <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/532/magic-words?act=2>



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Convinced of God's grace, the Church of the Covenant strives to be a caring and compassionate congregation, welcoming all people regardless of age, race, national origin, marital status, gender, affectional orientation, and mental or physical ability.