

September 06, 2020
Romans 13:8-14
“Wake Up and Die”
Michael Stanfield

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 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.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

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; 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; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify *its* desires.

Just before the death of actor W. C. Fields, a friend visited Fields in his hospital room and was surprised to find him thumbing through a Bible.

Asked what Fields who was not religious at all was doing with a Bible, Fields replied, “I’m looking for loopholes.”

We will one day all die. There are no loopholes. This precious life will eventually be over.

Generations before our modern era accepted this fact – embraced it even. In fact, the medievals — who lived through multiple plagues — had *this* artistic tradition for centuries:

In almost every portrait, the artist would sneak in some small symbol of death (usually a skull tucked into the corner). It was called “Memento Mori” — “Think on death.” These portraits were usually commissioned by wealthy merchants (the only ones who could afford a portrait) and the paintings usually celebrated their wealth and prosperity. Yet, the artistic tradition of “Memento Mori” was saying, “Don’t be a fool — this is the fate that faces all of us. Think on this. Think hard.”

Today we may not have artists painting death reminders into the corners of the portraits of the rich since, these days, not even our artists know well how to embrace death. But we do have our “Memento Mori”. Only it has come from nature. It is Covid-19, inserted into the corner of our country’s great prosperity and comfort. It is, in fact, the skull that is inviting us all, every day to, “Think on this. Think hard.” David French, “Coronavirus, Courage, and the Second Temptation of Christ,” March 22, 2020. <https://frenchpress.thedispatch.com/p/coronavirus-courage-and-the-second>. Retrieved March 30, 2020.

And if one could say that anything good could come from a plague – perhaps this is it. After all, death denial is not healthy. In fact, meaningful, fulfilled living cannot happen without acceptance of and preparation *for* the inevitable – our deaths.

What are *you* doing today to prepare for *your* inevitable death?

I have been in ministry now for over 30 years and my guess is that I have officiated at more than 200 funerals. In the Presbyterian Church the official name of a worship service dedicated to the death of a member is Celebration of Life and Witness to the Resurrection. The service is therefore to be just that – a celebration of the gift of the unique life of the individual and a testimony not only to the *individual's* faith in the resurrection but the faith of the whole church in that event.

Neither the word “Eulogy” nor “Obituary” capture what this service is about since an obituary is simply a death notice and a eulogy is nothing but a speech praising the dead. Deeper than death notices, which are simple catalogues of one’s activities and relationships, and more realistic than Eulogies which are a redaction of one’s life down to only that which is praiseworthy, Celebrations of Life are efforts to find the unique core of the person and to lift that up with thanksgiving as a gift from God. It is not the dead who are ultimately praised, but God, for the way God’s presence was woven into the frail humanity of the deceased.

What would you write about *yourself* in preparation for *your* service of Celebration? What would you consider to be *your* essence? Family, church, your struggles against injustice, your kindness your faithfulness your curiosity about the mysteries of life ... or your golf game and your bowling trophies?

In his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul has instructions on how Christians can lead meaningful lives, ones that lead to inspirational celebrations of this gift we know as life. He challenges us to act in ways that fulfill the law of God by loving our neighbors as ourselves. According to Paul, all of the commandments, from “you shall not commit adultery” to “you shall not covet” can be summed up in one word: “love”. Love is so important that it is the only debt that Paul permits. “Owe no one anything,” he insists, “*except* to love one another”.

Paul tells us that “salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers.” Of course, Paul thought that the consummation of history and the literal return of Christ was imminent; and *that*, as we know, turned out to be wrong. However it is not far-fetched to associate that consummation with our deaths. In other words, the day when we will stand before our maker is nearer than we think, so we better jump on every opportunity to love our neighbors as ourselves that we can.

“Lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light,” urges Paul. “Live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy”.

In other words, live your life so that I, your pastor, won’t have to struggle for words at your funeral.

We are, each of us, contributing to our life’s story with the choices we make each day – choices that will eventually end up being spoken about – if not loudly at our funerals, then whispered at the reception that follows. What you do to deny life and its mysterious source, invariably dies

with you. What you do to celebrate life and its source in all its wondrous forms lives on. Unless, of course you are seeking to live in infamy – of which these days, there seem to be quite a lot of folks.

I am therefore not talking about doing things that will be remembered, although Lord knows our culture is constantly urging us to do things in order to be remembered. But whether we are remembered or not is not important – not by a long shot. Living to be remembered is, in fact, not really living at all. Living to be remembered is nothing more than overblown ego-centric posturing that is devoid of love and more often leaves a path of destroyed lives in its wake.

I am talking about leaving the world better, by way of love, and true calling than you found it. Through Christ, our past has been redeemed and our future has been assured. I am therefore freed *from* myself to love and act as if my life depends on it – which in a way, it does.

Now, I will certainly be remembered if I decide to blow up the courthouse in downtown Columbia. But the celebration of violence that that act would entail would leave a legacy of destruction and hate, distrust and blame of which there is already plenty. And make no mistake about it, when one does those kinds of things, they *are* celebrated by the media. Celebrity is worshipped in our culture and it does not matter how you get there. And alas, all that does is to mock life.

On the other hand, the particular love I have demonstrated to my family, my friends and the congregations I have served, lives *on in their love*, engendering even more love – for generations to come – even though it is a certainty that in 100 years no one alive remember anything about me at all or will care personally that I ever lived. But the love, the love I incarnate and the integrity with which I live out my calling will be payed forward as it were.

“Follow me” and “Love one another.” They make up the core of the Christian life because our love lived through a genuine calling will transform the world for the better, whether we are alive to see it or not, and whether we are given personal credit for it or not.

Have you noticed that, at least in the church, when people die, what is said about them in celebration of their lives is very different from the way we are taught is cause to be remembered?

No matter how much time a person spends either doing those things that may cause him or her to be remembered long after death or burning the candle at both ends to be successful, what is said about one is always about all the other stuff: how one tried to live faithfully with integrity; how one *loved* and *was* loved; what one selflessly gave; how one connected; how much one meant to the lives of the real people around one, small kindnesses, lifelong passions and what made one laugh.

So the question is: Why do we spend so much time on either being remembered, which is destructive, or on the things that are not going to be said about us when we die and are soon forgotten anyway?

If you want your service to include a note that you loved your neighbor as yourself, you don't

have to achieve accolades in your chosen field, you don't have to make a whole lot of money or invent some life-saving technology. You simply have to love. But in our world today, I am actually of the conviction that the former activities are easier.

Really loving is hard. It goes against the grain of advancement and success and being remembered. If you really want to get ahead and be remembered, you need to be politically savvy – know how to dodge and weave. But can you ever remember any minister celebrating – even a career politician's life by recalling what a savvy politician he was? *If* positive words can be found to be said about a career politician, they are often extraneous to the political realm; they are about being loving, having integrity, and standing up for justice when it was not politically expedient.

Living love into the world is the advice that Paul gives for the legacy we should be looking to leave. It is transformative and it ultimately does not matter whether we get any credit for it.

For example... Theologian/Psychotherapist/ Professor Ann Belford Ulanov, in her fascinating study of unconscious images entitled "The Wisdom of the Psyche," writes of someone "living love into the world," someone "in whose presence" Ulanov says, "... you feel the capacity to be born." She tells the story of a Harlem woman discovered by the press who for forty years had been taking into her home the infants of drug-addicted prostitutes and raising them as her own.

"She is now in her eighties," writes Ulanov, "and very well known in Harlem. Women come and leave their babies on her doorstep. The babies they bring are addicted. She does not treat them with drugs, which is the usual medical way with children. She said in one interview: 'I love them back into being.' That means holding the infants and walking up and down with them, singing and talking to them as they suffer withdrawal from the drugs. If the babies are made well, and the mothers have kicked their own habits, she gives the babies back to their mothers.

There, in her, is the love Paul is talking about, love lived into the world, love of neighbor as self." The Wisdom of the Psyche (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley Publications, 1988), 99-100.

These days, we don't have to go far to encounter neighbors in need of love, with immigrants, people of color, those who are anything but heterosexual, and the elderly, all at risk in frightening ways. What will be a shame might not be what is said at your service of celebration but what is whispered in the fellowship hall – "*She talked a lot about love and justice but it was always that somebody else ought to do something – never her...*" Loving neighbor involves more than just talk.

Being a fan of Star Wars, I can always find examples of such biblical themes there. Luke [Skywalker] is best defined, not by his heroism in battle, but his love for and commitment to his friends and family. If you will remember, in the very first movie – which is actually episode 4, initially on Tatooine, he refuses to abandon his uncle and aunt to follow Obi-Wan to Alderaan even though his greatest personal desire is to get off that God forsaken planet and begin training as a star pilot.

Later on Dagobah, despite pleading from Yoda and Obi-Wan Kenobi, Luke makes a decision to save his friends from danger on Bespin. ... Luke's decision to turn off his light saber in the face

of the Emperor, refusing to kill his father who he still loves, and, in effect, sacrificing himself in order to uphold the principles of the Jedi way, is what defines who he is at the end of *his* arc in the original trilogy. He is someone who has learned that loving patience and principle, even if impractical in the short run, must be upheld; even in the face of almost certain death, and even if it means that others might die in the process. In effect, he had come to embrace the philosophy of his masters which also just happens to be very Christian. Amanda Ward, "Star Wars: The Force awakens: Who is Luke Skywalker?" *Making Star Wars*, June 17, 2015, <http://makingstarwars.net>.

Perhaps the greatest challenge for each of us, as we consider our own funerals, is to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ”. This means seeing the world through the eyes of Christ, and trying to be his hands and feet. No one does this perfectly, but Henri Nouwen came pretty close.

After Nouwen died of a heart attack, writer Philip Yancey reflected on his life. Trained as a psychologist and theologian, Nouwen spent his early years teaching at Notre Dame, Yale and Harvard, writing books and traveling widely as a conference speaker.

But then he realized that his own spirituality was being suffocated, and he made a major change. He moved into a home for the seriously disabled, and spent the last 10 years of his life caring for a young man named Adam. You might say that Nouwen “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” and made a commitment to “owe no one anything, except to love one another”. Every day, Nouwen spent hours working with Adam – bathing and shaving him, brushing his teeth, combing his hair and helping him as he tried to eat.

You might think that this would be a big sacrifice for Nouwen; but it was not. Yancey wondered if this was the best use of Nouwen’s time, and asked him if there wasn’t someone else who could take over the manual chores. Nouwen informed Yancey that he was not sacrificing anything, insisting that “It is *I*, not Adam, who gets the main benefit from our friendship.”

The same is true for anyone who is willing to “put on the Lord Jesus.” We don’t need to live full-time in a home for the disabled, but we can do the same kind of thing in our own homes, schools, workplaces, churches and communities. With covid-19 a fact of life, there are plenty of isolated lonely folks who are craving human contact right now.

And whenever we reach out in love, we discover that *we* get untold benefits from the friendships we develop. Yancey writes that Nouwen “had learned to love Adam, truly to love him. In the process he had learned what it must be like for God to love us – spiritually uncoordinated [and] able to respond with what must seem to God like inarticulate grunts and groans – but absolutely valued beyond measure.” Yancey, Philip. "Yancey: The holy inefficiency of Henri Nouwen." *Christianity Today*, December 9, 1996. christianitytoday.com.

Each of us is contributing to what will be said at our funerals and the legacy of love that we will leave – or maybe won’t leave, with the choices we make today. Let’s not leave anything to chance, but focus on loving our neighbors as ourselves, laying aside the works of darkness and putting on the Lord Jesus. Such choices will create the core of a life not just worth living, but a life worth celebrating.

Regardless of the actions we take, most important to note is that ultimately our lives have their source in God and it is to that same source that they will inexorably return.

In closing, once, when the aging Dalai Lama, was asked what surprised him most in life, he answered, “Man. Because he sacrifices his health in order to make money. Then he sacrifices money to recuperate his health. Then he is so anxious about the future that he does not enjoy the present; the result being that he does not live in the present or the future; he lives as if he is never going to die, and then dies having never really lived.”

Wouldn't it be a shame if *we* died having never really lived?

Let us pray. Gracious God, make us mindful of our mortality that we may be freed to make choices that echo into eternity.

And now bless these gifts that they may help spread the good news of the life you offer beyond even death. In Christ's name we pray, amen.