

“Turn On Your Heart Light”
November 1, 2020
Romans 12:9-21

Election Day is upon us, and we are more nervous than ever. What will happen? How will we get through our national anxiety? Paul tells the Christians to "love from the center of who you are." Hear what the Spirit is saying to the people in Romans 2: 9-21:

Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle.

Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be alert servants of Christ, cheerfully expectant. Don't quit in hard times; pray all the harder. Help needy persons; be inventive in hospitality.

Bless your enemies; no cursing under your breath. Laugh with your happy friends when they're happy; share tears when they're down. Get along with each other; don't be stuck-up. Make friends with nobodies; don't be the Great Somebody.

Don't hit back; discover beauty in everyone. If you've got it in you, get along with everybody. Don't insist on getting even; that's not for you to do. "I'll do the judging," says God. "I'll take care of it."

Our Scriptures tell us that if you see your enemy hungry, go buy that person lunch, or if he's thirsty, get him a drink. Your generosity will surprise him with goodness. Don't let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good.

Here ends the reading. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.

It's about all we would need this year. 2020 has already brought us some doozies: the pandemic of course, and with it the stark and immediate changes in how we live our social and cultural lives, some of which will likely be permanent. Over 228,000 people have died in our country and 72,000+ new cases are being reported daily. Worldwide, there have been more than 46 million confirmed cases of the virus with a 2.6% death rate in all cases.

In March 2020, those in our country who could do so moved inside, hunkered down, and learned how to disinfect groceries and packages from Amazon. We learned where and when to use masks, how far away to stay from others, and who we could and could not safely hug.

Then on Memorial Day, we experienced the horror of watching George Floyd in downtown Minneapolis die on a street under the knee of a white police officer who had lost his sense of service and humanity. Mr. Floyd's death called attention to systemic racism and centuries of white supremacy in America, spawning a spate of protests and violence that have continued daily ever since in various communities around the country.

Six hurricanes slammed into the U.S. this year so far—Isaias, Hanna, Sally, Laura, and Delta, and just this week, Zeta--battering people, structures and wildlife with flooding and tornadoes along the Gulf Coast and the Atlantic. Just today, Typhon Goni battered the Philippines with sustained winds at 140 mph, causing untold deaths and more than 1 million people to be evacuated. California and Colorado have experienced the largest wildfires in their state histories.

We have experienced the death of a legal icon and trailblazer and the resulting upheaval in the Supreme Court nomination process, and this *election (!)*- - an election and anxiety like no other we have ever seen.

An alien dropping into our back yard is just what would make sense in this nonsensical year! I showed you the film, *ET The Extraterrestrial*, this Friday, precisely because of the weirdness of this year. I showed it to demonstrate the Christian values of love and acceptance that Paul writes about in his letter to the Romans, and I showed it because we can all learn from children what it means to

embrace the unusual, welcome the stranger and aid a “someone” in distress, putting anxiety and cultural expectations aside.

Steven Spielberg created *ET* to be experienced through the eyes of the children. He wanted to tell a story of how a broken family and unempowered kids could be brought together in responding to a greater need, the need to rescue, save, and release to his home a creature from another world. *ET* requires that the viewer release their assumptions and allow the characters to tell the story of love that transcends science and rules, convention and the normal power dynamics inherent in our society.

He asked his artists to construct ET’s eyes from a composite of Ernest Hemingway, Albert Einstein, and Carl Sandburg so that ET’s most prominent feature would remind the audience of wisdom and empathy. Spielberg knew he had hit the mark when he screened *ET* in 1982 at the White House at the invitation of Ronald and Nancy Reagan. Seated next to the President, he stole glances at them and noted with satisfaction that they were, right there in front of God and everybody, falling in love with the imaginary spaceman and his unlikely hero children, laughing at the alien’s antics and crying during all the touching scenes.

I received an unwanted notice from the IRS recently. They don’t know who I am. They can’t match my name and address up Chris’s and my tax returns. Imagine that. After multiple days of calling only to repeatedly get a message saying they had too many calls... try later... click, I finally got in the queue at 7 am Tuesday morning.

Because this is 2020 and because everything else has gone so screwy, I expected a really rude phone call, or to be disconnected again, or to be told that I was the problem. Instead, I got a friendly woman on the line who started the conversation by asking me how she could be of help. I delayed an answer to her question and instead, asked her if she and her family were safe and well. We had a lovely working session after that and my problem was resolved easily. She had me wait on the phone line until she corrected my record, just so I wouldn't continue to worry.

And then she thanked me for being her first call of the morning and for being so nice to her. She said it doesn't happen often, and I expressed sadness for that. I wished her a good rest of the day and we ended the call. It's such a simple thing: leading with kindness, expressing gratefulness, and feeding a soul starved for human graciousness. Oh, and it made me feel good, too.

Many people make fun of IRS agents, dehumanizing, vilifying, and demonizing them. Personal jokes are hurtful, just like ethnic and racial jokes, jokes about religious and other professionals, LGBTQA folx, blonde women, and recently, women named "Karen." One simple step we can take toward re-humanizing the world is to stop telling these jokes, stop laughing at them and ask others to stop telling them, too.

Tenneson Woolf, a frequent leader for the Rocky Mountain Conference, met with our clergy this past week. He said:

We are living in a time of great turning,
the rhythm and habit of coming back to the deeper WHY of things.
We should try to not be in the not-so-polished version of ourselves so that we may
receive more wisdom and less noise,
so that wisdom can have more room to grow.

Tennessee's conversation partner was Quanita Roberson, a motivational speaker and consultant. She added to his words with this truth:

We need kindness now more than ever
We are human learning to be spiritual. It's about equity---
The courage to be simple and to claim our clarity.

This is what Paul was talking about in his letter to the Romans. When he invited these relatively new Christians into community, he encouraged them to "love from the center of who you are." This is wonderful language. For Henry in the *E.T.* story, it means teaching the alien the all-important lesson on how to get candy from the Pez dispenser!

For us, it could mean making a phone call to your family member who voted for the "other guy" and telling them that you love them from the very center of your being, despite that you are light-years apart in your politics. It means turning your heart light on and turning off the sirens in your head screaming for you to join in the anxiety over what might happen this coming Tuesday.

We can only *accompany* one another as we all journey as Americans into the unknown this week. Do you remember seven years ago? Many of you were either members of Parker UCC or Hilltop UCC at the time. You were practicing your faith in the way you thought was righteous and you were pretty sure the other UCC church in town had it all wrong. Or perhaps you were living in another town and attending another church in the UCC, or more likely than that you were worshipping God in another denomination's voice, or not at all.

Spirit worked in all your stories, and in mine too, to bring us all together, though it did not seem possible at the time. When it was that Paul wrote to the

Romans, both sides of the Christian Way were impossibly divided over the issue of religious purity. Paul took Peter on directly in the letter to the Galatians, telling his side of the conflict in Chapter 2, beginning with the 11th verse. I'm now going to have Chris read to you an excerpt from Paul's letter about the divisiveness within the first-century Christian church:

Later, when Peter came to Antioch, I had a face-to-face confrontation with him because he was clearly out of line. Here's the situation. Earlier, before certain persons had come from James, Peter regularly ate with the non-Jews. But when that conservative group came from Jerusalem, he cautiously pulled back and put as much distance as he could manage between himself and his non-Jewish friends. That's how fearful he was of the conservative Jewish clique that's been pushing the old system of circumcision. Unfortunately, the rest of the Jews in the Antioch church joined in that hypocrisy so that even Barnabas was swept along in the charade.

But when I saw that they were not maintaining a steady, straight course according to the Message, I spoke up to Peter in front of them all: "If you, a Jew, live like a non-Jew when you're not being observed by the watchdogs from Jerusalem, what right do you have to require non-Jews to conform to Jewish customs just to make a favorable impression on your old Jerusalem cronies?"

No way could Christianity come together after such a bitter split.

No way could Parker and Hilltop reunite to create UCC Parker Hilltop.

No way were some of you *ever* going to go to another church—never ever.

Yet here you are. Here we are. Our WHY is more important than anything else we profess to be, because our WHY is God's Heart Light, it is Love that radiates outward from the Very Center of Being.

Our country will get through this time of divisiveness and strife. It will not be easy and it may take a long time, but it will get through it, just as Christianity survived Paul and Peter's SmackDown and just as this church survived its split, its coming back together, and its growing pains as it was becoming the New Creation God called into being.

We are, indeed, “living in a time of great turning” and “we need kindness now more than ever.”

So make that phone call you have been dreading.

“Bless your enemies; don’t curse them under your breath.” They think they are doing the best thing for the country, too. Instead of squaring off against your opponents this week, choose to *accompany* them. This will not be easy. You won’t want to do it, but it is the Christian thing to do. Dr. Paul Farmer, Ph.D. of Harvard’s School of Medicine urges us that accompaniment is a spiritual practice as important as prayer.

“To accompany someone,” he said, “is to go somewhere with him or her, to break bread together, to be present on a journey with a beginning and an end...There’s an element of mystery and openness in accompanying someone. It says, “I’ll share your fate for awhile, and by ‘awhile’ I don’t mean ‘a little while.’”

When E.T. leaves for home and Elliott starts to cry in grief for the new friend he will not see again, the alien lights his index finger and places it on the boy’s forehead promising, “I’ll be right... here.”

Jesus said it to his disciples; Paul said it when he was languishing in a Roman prison. When your family member or former friend told you to get lost, that they never wanted to talk to or see you again, they were saying it, too, you just couldn’t hear it then.

To accompany one you don’t agree with is to thoroughly and patiently listen to their truth, without interrupting their statement with a “yes but.” It means acknowledging their humanity and their viewpoint before and above anything else you might feel compelled to say or do. It means stating your own truth without name-calling or insult and allowing room for your conversation partner to extend to you the same courtesy. And then it means pledging to

accompany them through whatever comes next and pledging further not to delete them out of your contacts list just because they don't see the world through your eyes. We will get through our national story, together as Americans, no matter who wins the election. Our children are counting on us to find a way.

So turn on your heart light. Especially this week, for God's sake, as the song goes, "Turn on your heart light, let it shine wherever you go."

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UCC Parker Hilltop

10926 E. Democrat Rd.

Parker, CO 80134