



YOU KNOW WHAT TIME IT IS
SCRIPTURE: PSALM 119: 33-40; ROMANS 13: 8-14
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
SEPTEMBER 10, 2017

The Rev. Dr. Marcia Mount Shoop, Pastor

Greg and Andrea Smith had a plan.¹ Houston had only been their home since July, so their plan was the result of asking people who understand hurricanes more than they do.

Andrea was due any time now and she had been having contractions off and on for several days. They would get to the hospital early—before Hurricane Harvey hit. Saturday night, there were a few clouds in the sky and just a little rain. Everyone agreed, better be safe than sorry, they'd head to the hospital Sunday morning.

Greg and Andrea are both doctors so they were thinking ahead and they were watching the weather. Sunday morning came and instead of the few inches of rain they anticipated there would be, their apartment was surrounded by 2-3 feet of rain.

Within a few hours, Andrea was in full-fledged labor, having pretty strong contractions. It was time. Greg tried 911 but there was literally no answer. His mother, visiting from Montana to help with the new baby tried calling the Coast Guard and got no answer. The National Guard answered but there was no way they would be able to get there in time.

Greg and Andrea and Greg's mom prepared for a home delivery. Their apartment complex was full of medical professionals because it is near a Medical Center. A neighbor put a message on an online message board for supplies. Nurses and medical technicians from the neighborhood brought any medical supplies they might have. Greg's mother boiled instruments to try and sanitize things.

As floodwaters rose, a neighbor on the next floor up told them they could move upstairs to her apartment for the birth. An out of town obstetrician friend of Greg's was standing by on Skype to talk Greg through the impending delivery.

Meanwhile a neighbor contacted his father who lived across from a fire department. The man waded across the street and told the firefighters what was going on. They were able to get a dump truck through the floodwaters. When Greg heard the truck outside he ran out to ask for help. The men in the truck said, "we're here for you."

Neighbors then lined up to form a human chain to get Andrea and Greg through the waist high and rising water up into the back of the truck. They made it to the hospital in time for their daughter, Adrielle, to be born. Adrielle was born with some health issues and was admitted to the NICU—the hospital is where she needed to be and she is going to be ok.

Natural disasters can bring out the best in our human family. These are the stories that restore our faith in humanity, that make us feel like there might be some hope for the world after all. Touched by angels in our midst.

People pulling together, even forming a human chain—skin to skin, arm in arm, not letting suffering and tragedy have the last word as the rains just keep bearing down.

There is freedom in that human chain locked together by love, by a shared dream of a world reborn, where each life matters, and people move heaven and earth to take care of the most vulnerable among us. There is freedom from oppression, freedom from brutality, freedom from loneliness and isolation, freedom from despair when the human spirit elevates into such active, willful love—a human chain binding us together in love, freeing us up for love.

There is urgency in such extreme circumstances that can kick people in to another gear—they know what time it is—and they wake up to how much we need each other to make and keep life on this planet.

That sense of urgency, that intuition and action of our profound connection to each other, that “being woke and staying woke” way of being in the world—that’s what Paul is trying to get us to see, to feel, to embody in Romans.

Paul is writing to a church in a prominent urban center—a place like Houston—bustling with all kinds of people with conflicting ideas, practices, perspectives. He wrote it with a broader audience in mind. His message of God’s grace could spread from the Roman church, so it needed to carry the core truths of what it means to follow Jesus.

And Paul felt a sense of urgency—humanity needed to wake up and smell the coffee. With every day that passed, the world was getting closer to Jesus coming back. Paul has no time for malaise, no time for obliviousness or denial. Jesus’ followers must live each day expectantly—busily preparing for the birth of a new world.

There have been a few since Paul’s time who have tried sounding such an alarm—get yourselves together, Jesus is coming back soon. But such a sense of urgency more commonly circulates as bumper sticker theology and something we scoff at than it is a way of life Christians embody in our world.

Maybe you’ve seen them:

- After the rapture can I have your car?
- Jesus is coming back, look busy
- Jesus is coming back and he’s pissed

2000 years is enough to turn an expectant faith into stagnant one. It's hard for us Jesus followers to get all hot and bothered about Jesus coming back—that feels more like a relic of the past than a future possibility.

We contemporary, up to date and informed Christians focus our energy on more tangible things, right? Things like love, things like justice and mercy and truth.

Surely Paul would be down with those things. He says right here, love is fulfilling the whole law. So as long as we are just doing that—loving, then we're on track for whatever comes.

But even love can grow stagnant and get reduced down to bumper sticker theology, something to make light of, something that doesn't really make demands on us.

Jesus bumper stickers:

- Jesus loves you, everyone else thinks you are a jerk
- Jesus loves you but I'm his favorite
- Jesus loves you, me, not so much
- When Jesus said "Love your enemies" he probably meant don't kill them
- Please Jesus, Protect me from your followers
- Jesus called, he wants his religion back

Remember what Paul said just a few verses earlier than our passage today—let your love be genuine. And maybe being genuine gets harder when it feels like we've got all the time in the world, or that other people's problems aren't really our concern or when we start to sleep on the all encompassing love that Jesus poured into us and the whole wide world.

There are some important things Paul wants Jesus people like us to remember:

- Love has been poured into us by the Holy Spirit, and we are forever changed because of the lengths that love went for us in Christ's death on the cross.
- Love is not something that is commanded, it is not something that legalese or moral obligation instills in us. And Jesus is not simply our model, or exemplar, or teacher. He is our savior. Jesus saves us from ourselves; he empowers us to a love that is genuine.
- Put on Christ, Paul says—let yourself be enveloped in the love that heals, that freely gives itself.
- And your neighbor—we'll that's not just who lives next door, or who looks like you, or who makes you feel comfortable and secure. Your neighbor is anyone you can have an impact on—for good or for ill²—so wake up! That's everyone! You have the power to impact everyone—and love is our obligation to every one, every body, every heart and soul. Love does no wrong to its neighbor.

- And finally, Paul can't emphasize enough that love is not a weak way of being in the world. Love is a power like no other—it speaks truth, it holds humanity accountable and each of us is accountable to one another. Love is only love when it is alive and active, being and doing, healing and transforming, fulfilling and expecting.
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Today we celebrate one of our strongest acts of faith as Reformed Christians—Call. Call is our own version of a human chain—linking us to each other, binding us in Christ's love, arm in arm, heart with heart, call is our strong belief that we need each other and that God provides.

Richard's call to Grace Covenant is God's provision to and through the gathered body, a human chain that believes in a better world, believes in a future redeemed. Richard, uniquely, is called here—his gentle spirit, his keen mind, his diligence, his humor, his honesty and integrity. All his hours of pastoring in hospital rooms, teaching in classrooms, studying and growing in his own faith have equipped him and his family to be called here.

The Spirit stirred a sense of call in Richard and in us to welcome him into our midst as teacher, pastor, support and companion in Christ. The Spirit has called each one of us—and today we are called to make promises to Richard and his family and he is called to make promises to us—that we will trust God's call for us to be together at such a time as this.

You know what time it is, Richard? You know what time it is Grace Covenant? Time to live like today matters and that love is all we need. And that we are all meant for each other—an expectant love story crafted by Jesus himself.

We're arm in arm, heart to heart, trying to wake up and stay woke in a world that needs more than Sunday Christians and bumper sticker theology.

Do you know what time it is Grace Covenant? Time to wake up again to the powerful passion that Jesus instills in us—not for the status quo or business as usual, but for an urgent, all encompassing love.

The urgency to love is always upon us. And Paul's passionate plea to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” and “live honorably as in the day” has never been more timely and not just for hurricanes and earthquakes, but for the tragedies that grip our human family every day—racism, poverty, violence, homophobia, environmental degradation, greed—any brand of hate and any kind of orientation toward each other that demeans, that diminishes who it is that God empowers and calls us to be.

Touched by an Angel by Maya Angelou

*We, unaccustomed to courage
exiles from delight
live coiled in shells of loneliness
until love leaves its high holy temple
and comes into our sight
to liberate us into life.*

*Love arrives
and in its train come ecstasies
old memories of pleasure
ancient histories of pain.
Yet if we are bold,
love strikes away the chains of fear
from our souls*

*We are weaned from our timidity
In the flush of love's light
we dare be brave
And suddenly we see
that love costs all we are
and will ever be.
Yet it is only love
which sets us free*

You know what time it is, brothers and sisters, it's time for love to set us free.

Thanks be to God.

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/inspired-life/wp/2017/08/29/harveys-floodwater-had-a-pregnant-woman-trapped-then-neighbors-formed-a-human-chain/?utm_term=.d49021856caa
and <http://people.com/human-interest/houston-neighbors-form-human-chain-to-help-pregnant-woman-labor/>

² Cranfield, CEB. *Romans: A Shorter Commentary*, 333.