

September 10, 2017 • 14th Sunday after Pentecost

## **“Going Deeper: What Is Noble in the Sight of All”**

Sermon by the Rev. Patricia Farris



*Romans 13:8-12*

*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;*

Besides this, says Paul, you know what time it is. Ah. That may be the question to ask ourselves today. What time is it? What time is it in our heart? What time is it in our soul? Time for what?

How we know what time it is changes from generation to generation. My great-grandfather Scott was a farmer in southern Illinois. I think I remember that he had a pocket watch, but I don't know that he looked at it very often. Grandpa Scott told time by the phases of the moon. That's how he knew when it was time to plant his crops and when it was time for the harvest. That's how he knew when it was time for the rain or the snow to come, and when it was time for the first flowering of Spring.

I learned to tell time in a very different way. I cherish memories of sitting with my Dad and looking at his watch. He taught me how to look for the big hand and the little hand and how to tell time by reading the face of the watch. You had to know your numbers and you had to get the spatial relationships. So, when the little hand was on the 3 and the big hand on the 9, it was a quarter to three or 2:45.

It's different now. A new generation has grown up unaccustomed to watches with big hands and little hands. If they have a watch at all, it's probably digital and they're more likely to check the time on their phone than on a watch on their wrist. 2:45 is a sequence of numbers: 2, colon 4, 5. And there are some, maybe many, who don't know what you mean if you say “it's a quarter to three.”

How do you know what time it is? It appears that it's about half-past ten, so I'd better get on with this sermon.

Sometimes we think we know what time it is, and something happens to throw everything off completely. Hurricane Harvey did that in a huge way to all kinds of families, schools, and businesses. It had been time for back-to-school, except the schools were flooded and the families dispersed. It was time to pay the rent on the first of the month, but apartments were flooded or torn apart by the winds and renters had fled without their checkbooks. It was time for church, but churches were flooded, had no power, parishioners scattered from here to kingdom come.

It's really inspiring to know that church happened last Sunday anyway. Maybe you saw the LA Times front page story about worship last week at the First United Methodist Church in Dickinson, Texas, a suburb on the southeast side of Houston. Its history spans more than a century, including the time in 1900 when the original church building was destroyed by a hurricane and rebuilt.

When the storm hit, water poured into the sanctuary, ugly brown water several feet deep, over the top of many of the pews. When it was safe, the pastor, some parishioners, and strangers the pastor didn't recognize knew it was time to act. “The first thing you got to do is fix it,” the pastor said.

They pulled out pews, wet drywall, and swollen doors. By Saturday night, they put out a hand-made sign: WORSHIP SUNDAY AT 11 and arranged rows of blue chairs in place of the pews.

In his sermon, Pastor Matkin said: “the storm named Harvey, on the outside, is over. For many of us, there may still be a storm within. And it doesn't have to be that way. That storm within us—we can walk on top of it or we can sink in it.”

They sang, they prayed, they cried together, holding one another up, friend to friend. The Body of Christ incarnate. For the children's message, Pastor Matkin invited the kids up and gave them each a bottle of water left over from the volunteers. He invited them to pour the water into the baptismal font so they could bless the water. “We're going to pour water in here,” he said. “And you know what? If it fills up to overflowing and it floods the floor, don't worry about it.” The parishioners cheered.

They all stood around sharing coffee, pumpkin bread, and muffins. “It's just good,” one member said. “We're here. We're here.”

Sometimes there are times when it's time to lean on the everlasting arms—of God and of this precious community we call “church.”

This is how Paul put it to that little group of early Christians in Rome. Surrounded, often overtaken by the power and might of the Roman Empire where Caesar was Lord, they gathered to lean in. “Owe no one anything,” he told them, “except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.” All the commandments “are summed up,” he said, “in this: Love your neighbor as yourself.” This love, as Paul understood it, wells up in the Spirit-filled heart and always at just the right time.

And just what time is it, according to Paul? “You know what time it is,” he said. The dawn is breaking even when the night seems darkest, as biblical scholar N.T. Wright reminds. The Kingdom of Heaven is here, in our hearts, and in how we love one another.

Our sermon series “Going Deeper—Faith for Such a Time as This”—invites us to revisit and remember the sustaining power of gathering together as church, for prayer, study, the sacraments and for worship. It’s pretty basic, isn’t it? If there’s a big hand and a little hand on our spiritual watch, let’s just say that church is the big hand, the gathered community, the place where we’re reminded, again and again, of the time-honored traditions, practices, and core values of our faith, remembering who and whose we are. Leaning in. Drawing strength and sustenance from God and from the love and fellowship we find in being with one another.

We might then say that the little hand of our spiritual watch points to the things we do within ourselves—prayer, contemplation, silence, resting in the Word and presence of God.

The Jesuits practice a spiritual discipline that may be helpful to us, too, in this work of going deeper.

Jesuits end each day with a brief spiritual self-examination, a simple prayer. Here’s how it goes: find a quiet place, take a few moments to breathe, and let the day fall away. And then, ask God: “Where were you today, Lord? What really happened in my day? What did you want me to notice?”

In writing of this, Jim McDermott said: “some days what stands out are the good things, the moments of joy or laughter. Other days it is the things we got wrong, the people we ignored, a way we could do better. Sometimes it is just a couple minutes of rest in the gentle quiet.”

This is the kind of going deeper, centering, that becomes for us a school of love. We learn, we grow, we repent, we pledge to do better, and we place it all in the hands and grace of God. It was Muhammad Ali who once observed: “My soul has grown over the years, and some of my views have changed. As long as I am alive, I will continue to try to understand more, because the work of the heart is never done.” What time is it? This much we know: it is time for love to guide all our actions and to animate all our words. It is time for love to define our relationship to all others of God’s children of whatever age, race, nationality, identity, or party. It is time to love God’s whole creation. It is time to owe no one anything, except to love one another, as the Apostle Paul, said, for this is the commandment to love one another as yourself. What time is it? What time is it in our heart? What time is it in our soul? Time for what? Time to remember that it is written: faith, hope, and love abide. And the greatest of these is love.

Notes:

Matt Pearce and Hailey Branson-Potts. “Rising Above the Flood Waters.” LA Times, September 4, 2017.

N.T. Wright. Twelve Months of Sundays. Morehouse Publishing, 2012.

Jim McDermott. “Charlottesville and Trump: A spiritual exercise for the overwhelmed and exhausted.” America Magazine. August 16, 2017.

Albert Einstein. The World As I See It.