

LOVE, CHRIST'S TERRIBLE TENDERNESS
+John S. Thornton for Sunday September 6, 2020
St. Martin's Episcopal Church, Lebanon, OR

I have a short preface to this sermon. Like you and everybody else, I'm a "political animal" (Aristotle). That's because we all live in the *polis*, Greek for "city" (but could be "county," "state" or "nation," I suppose.) We're all part of it. And we all take part in it. We're all responsible for its condition. Nobody can opt out. Nobody is excused. I'm here to say – and I want you to repeat this – my politics is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. If there's some coincidence with a political party's policies or platform, I consider that grace – but I do not consider it another religion.

Paul – I mean the Apostle Paul – sure made trouble. He made it for himself and every Christian since. However, I have no right to correct or criticize him. Forgive me. Have I ever gone through what he went through? No, nothing anywhere near it. Here's his story (2 Corinthians 11:24-27): "Five times I have received...the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger of rivers, in danger of bandits, in danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger from false brothers and sisters, in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty...cold and naked." He really lays it on. About the only thing Paul and I have in common is that "many a sleepless night." The sleepless night was, usually, a Saturday night, when my Sunday sermon wasn't done. (It was the people who suffered from my lack of preparation.) Oh, and I have been around some dangerous Gentiles too.

But back to the trouble Paul made. In his letter - "epistle," if you prefer – to the Christians in Rome, he wrote, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities...for there is no authority except from God...Whoever resists authority resists God." Really? Well, tell that to Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Tell it to Martin Niemöller. Tell it to the whole Confessing Church in Germany in the late 1930s. There was no God in Nazism. There was no authority. There was no duty to obey. There *was* a duty to resist. Unfortunately, thousands of German Christians, Catholic and Protestant, took Paul at his word, literally, and left their churches to follow the Führer. (My spiritual director, the English historian and theologian Donald Nichol, dead now, told me that sixty thousand Roman Catholics left.) The others would risk being imprisoned, would risk being hanged.

Sure, Scripture has authority. So does reason. So does history. So does the human heart. So does, for us, the simplest creed: "Christ is Lord." Were you listening when Martin Luther King, Jr. and John Lewis told you so? Black Baptists never became ungrounded from all these.

Having said that, I want to give Paul some credit. Evidently, some of the new, probably Gentile, Christians in Rome were a pain. In today's Epistle (Romans 13:8-14), Paul reams them out, for their "jealousy," for their "quarreling," for their "licentiousness," for their "reveling," for their "drunkenness," *and* for their "debauchery." I had to look that one up. What are you doing when you're debauching? Well, you're partying way too much. You're even participating in orgies. I leave that up, not to your memories, but to your imagination. All those people were, dang it, representing the Jesus Movement to the world. For them, their new liberty was just old license.

Who'd ever want to be part of that? It wasn't any kind of new humanity. As was said of those gathered on Pentecost in Jerusalem, "How they love each other!" That's the goal.

(It was, of course, centuries before Christians evolved into Episcopalians. Garrison Keiler, of "A Prairie Home Companion" fame, an Episcopalian in St. Paul, Minnesota, says, "We make fun of Episcopalians for their blandness, their excessive calm, their fear of giving offense, their lack of speed and, also, their secret fondness of macaroni and cheese." Ah, but we can raise hell when we have to.)

Back to Paul and those Christians in Rome. Paul was saying, "You can't behave that way! Stop it! Lie low! Go underground if you have to! (The catacombs.) Don't do anything to attract the attention of the authorities, especially Nero!

The Emperor Nero. What a scumbag, the historians will tell you. Maybe he was marginally okay during the first part of his reign, after which came that history-making scumbaggery. For him, terms like "jerk," "creep," "ratfink" would be considered accolades. Nero hated Christians, Jews and Gentiles. Jews a little more than Gentiles. He blamed them for the fire that destroyed Rome (while he fiddled). It was a case study in "Absolute power corrupts absolutely" (Lord Acton). He was too deranged to be stopped. He dreamed up new ways to torture his enemies, for the fun of it. He'd have Christians dressed in animal skins, put them in an arena and turn wild beasts loose among them, to maul and masticate them. Or, for his garden parties, he'd have Christians daubed with pitch, then set them on fire, to be "living torches," running, writhing, screaming, until, finally, silent...motionless...immolated. It was his idea of entertainment. And the party-goers, I suppose, thought it was hysterical. They had made a deal with Nero, that they'd go along with whatever he said or did so long as they had a place among the powerful – and money kept coming their way. So they took on his sadism and his perversion and his insanity and made it their own, just as culpable for evil as he. It wasn't the first time in history. It won't be the last. It happens all the time. Power is a drug. Money too. And evil.

I credit Paul with, at least, trying to save Christians from all that. I mean from Nero *and* from jealousy and quarreling and licentiousness and reveling and drunkenness and debauchery. What you do with your body, he said, you do to our body, which is meant to be the body of Christ, a rising to the highest level of humanity. If you just love your neighbor, love your neighbor as yourself, you'll fulfill the whole Law of Moses. And you don't have forever to think about it, he said in so many words: "The night is far gone, the day is near." The "day," when the Christ will come again, which is every day and every moment of every day, come with a terrible tenderness. He has never left. He will never leave.

Paul's imperative wasn't just a tougher version of the "All you need is love" (The Beatles). Since they were new at it this, they needed some specifics; so he gave them to them. (We need them too.) In the twelfth chapter of Romans, he gets very specific. Here's what he commands:

Let love be genuine.
(Write this down.)

Hate what is evil.

Hold fast to what is good.

Love one another with mutual affection.

Outdo one another in showing honor.

Do not lag in zeal.

Be ardent in spirit.

Serve the Lord.

Rejoice in hope.

Be patient in suffering.

Persevere in prayer.

Contribute to the needs of the saints.

(Are you writing this down?)

Extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you.

Bless and do not curse them.

Rejoice with those who rejoice.

Weep with those who weep.

Live in harmony with one another.

Do not be haughty.

Associate with the lowly.

Do not claim to be wiser than you are.

Do not repay anyone evil for evil.

Take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.

Live peaceably with all.

Never avenge yourselves.

If your enemies are hungry, feed them.

If your enemies are thirsty, give them something to drink.

Overcome evil with good.

(Underline that.)

Put that on the refrigerator. Tape it to the mirror. Tack to a doorpost. Write on the palm of your hand. Anywhere to keep it foremost in your life. That's the stuff with which we'll be re-made. That's the stuff of Christ.

Do it. Don't be afraid. Why hesitate to be a new being and to build a new world?