

Packing the Backpack

Psalm 119:33-40, Romans 13:8-14

Center Church, Hartford

September 6, 2020

The Rev. Dr. Rochelle A. Stackhouse

Have you noticed how many angry people there are around these days? How many faces on the news are in “resting angry face?” How many words of hate and hurt are hurled from those faces at so many people? How many people seem so hopeless that they will take any angry action because no good thing seems to be in the future or they are not getting exactly what they want from the world?

It's easy to get caught up in all this anger, fear and hate and in reacting against it with anger, fear and hate. That, my friends, is a hopeless cycle. Is there any room anymore for joy or hope or love? Do we need to feel guilty or as though we are ignoring the great important stuff out there if we experience joy and take that joy into the world?

No. Today's two texts take us into a joy that exists in the midst of the real and unpredictable and frightening world in which we live. Let me explain.

This Psalm, the longest in the book of Psalms, takes the law, the thing that too many Christians turn into a form of punishment and source of guilt, and turn it to joy, to the source of living with hope and joy. Listen to this translation in the Contemporary English Version:

“Direct me by your commands! I love to do what you say!...Take away my foolish desires and let me find life by walking with you....Your wonderful teachings protect me from the insults that I hate so much. I long for your teachings!”

And listen to these words from Eugene Peterson's translation of Romans: “Love other people as well as you do yourself. You can't go

wrong when you love others. When you add everything up in the law code, the sum total is *love*. But make sure that you don't get so absorbed and exhausted in taking care of all your day-by-day obligations that you lose track of the time and doze off, oblivious to God. The night is over; the dawn is about to break. Be up and awake to what God is doing! God is putting the finishing touches on the salvation work began when we first believed! We can't afford to waste a minute, must not squander these precious daylight hours in frivolity and indulgence, in sleeping around and bickering and grabbing everything in sight. Get out of bed and get dressed! Don't loiter and linger, waiting until the very last minute. Dress yourselves in Christ and be up and about!"

Wow. Talk about timely advice! "Make sure that you don't get so absorbed and exhausted in taking care of all your day-by-day obligations that you lose track of the time and doze off, oblivious to God." God's not standing there ready to berate you for not having made your bed and cleaned up your room, rather God is excited about what may be coming and desperately wants you to be a part of it! God wants you to be part of repairing the world to be a place of love! God knows that is a more joyful place to be than immersed in anger and hate. It doesn't mean ignoring those things, but it does mean not letting them weigh you down so far that if you see the light at the end of the tunnel, as they say in New York, all you can see is New Jersey! What Martin Luther King and so many others have tried to teach us is that we can live out of the joy of knowing how much we are loved and what an immense capacity we have for love, even in the midst of the kind of hurt and hate and anger he faced, believing against popular wisdom that love IS more powerful than hate. But we can't find this laying in bed clicking through one depressing post after another. We can find it by dressing our selves in Christ and being up and about and eager for what God has in store.

In an ordinary year, our children would be packing backpacks to take to school, and many of you would daily be putting your lunch bags and briefcases together to head out to work. Some still are doing those things; some are staying in their sweats and eating in

front of their computers. Some of you are retired and, perhaps, frustrated that you can't be out and about to see people and engage in volunteer work or go to performances or games or whatever.

But today I say to you, let's pack some things for ourselves to use, whether we are at home, in our workplaces, in our schools, in front of our computers or wherever we are. Let's imagine together what we might make sure we have at hand in order to participate with God in living in love no matter where we are.

I have here a terrific tote bag I found up in our Faith Formation closet. It reminds us of the words of Paul's letter to the Corinthians: "love is patient; love is kind; love never fails." In this bag I have some note cards and a pen. Let's think together about "dressing ourselves in Christ" and what we might want to put in our supply bag for wherever we are spending our days. The best way to do that might be to try to think of how Jesus defined loving one another. For example, he told his disciples, as he washed their feet, to serve one another as he was serving them. That's one thing I put in. Take a minute and think. FB folk you can write yours in the comments and I'll add them later, and I'll send all of these to everyone so you can save it or print it out to remind you when you are tempted to drown in these days. What would you suggest?

(People shared: "when they go low, we go high," serve one another, be present, practice patience, forgiveness, love, work for income equality, practice grace, empathy, perspective, wear a mask, flexibility, tenderness, speak truth in love.)

These are difficult days, my friends, with more to come. Still, God is with us. We are with each other. We have the power of the love of Christ within us that can do wonders beyond what we can ask or imagine. "The night is about over; the dawn is about to break. And that is joyful news! Be up and awake to what God is doing!" And take your supplies with you. Amen.