

‘What Is Church?’  
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based on Romans 13:8-14 and Matthew 18:15-20

**Romans 13:8-14**

<sup>8</sup>Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. <sup>9</sup>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.” <sup>10</sup>Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

<sup>11</sup>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; <sup>12</sup>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; <sup>13</sup>let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. <sup>14</sup>Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

**Matthew 18:15-20**

<sup>15</sup>“If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. <sup>16</sup>But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. <sup>17</sup>If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. <sup>18</sup>Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. <sup>19</sup>Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. <sup>20</sup>For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

Please pray with me:

Healing and reconciling God, open our ears and our eyes this morning to the wonder of your Word. Create in us a mindfulness for others and a call to follow Jesus ... praying that loving call translates into healing and reconciliation. Amen.

There was a part of me that didn’t want to get out of bed this morning. I didn’t want to wake up and learn anymore about what was happening in Florida and the Caribbean islands. Part of it is a feeling of helplessness and part of it is ... trauma overload.

When will this helplessness in the midst of trauma end? It's like Hurricane Harvey and Hurricanes Irma and Jose are metaphors for what's happening in our world right now.

Massive wildfires and earthquakes.

Threats of war.

Economic uncertainty.

Political unrest.

Computer hacking

Denominational schism

We don't just have hurricanes going on in the Caribbean, but a tempest of mental and spiritual unrest in our heads and hearts. I was at a meeting this week with some other clergy and we referred to it as a kind of spiritual warfare.

Where do we turn when the world around us feels so unstable? How do we calm our heads and hearts?

We turn to God ... and we turn to the only thing in this world that never fails us! We rely on what is forever faithful ... God's love for us all.

Even though the world may be trying to tell us one thing, the people who make up the Church of Jesus Christ know we aren't standing on a foundation of shifting sands ... where fear rules and tempests rile the hearts of human kind.

Rather the Church of Jesus Christ is built on love: unfailing; faithful; hopeful; ... a divine gift.

Every Sunday morning I pray the words of the sermon ... and when I got to this part this morning my shoulders relaxed and I felt a heaviness leave my body.

I not only read the words, but I could feel ... Love is the foundational building block ... the very cornerstone ... that supports our lives of faith. God's love for us is what gets us out of bed in the morning and supports us as we face the day ahead.

God's love can heal the wounded heart and has the power to reconcile all into a sense of fulfillment of God's call.

It is God's love for us that prompts us to be loving! So we can respond to hurricanes and earthquakes and threats of war not with a desire to bury our heads in the sand or feel the heaviness on our hearts... but with boldness to enter the fray and help others see their way through.

We established in the Children's Message that people are the church.

Brick and mortar do not make a church. Flesh and blood make a church.

Single mindedness self-centeredness doesn't make a church. Unity in love makes a church.

I was visiting Shirley Townsend in the hospital this week. Despite the pain and discouragement ... the one thing Shirley is grateful for is the church. The cards, the visits ... the prayers ... mean so much to her. Those things have more healing power than anything a doctor or nurse could prescribe.

The Apostle Paul wrote an eloquent letter to the believers in Rome helping them cope with unrest and trauma. Paul's letter helped them understand the power to heal was

not only at the heart of God's love for us ... but in how we love one another and help heal one another.

For Paul the unrest and turmoil surrounding the church (or the believers) was temporal ... but God's love, exhibited to us through Jesus Christ, was eternal.

Susan Eastman, who often contributes to a blog called 'Working Preacher' says this about today's reading from Romans:

- *"In this brief but extremely rich passage, Paul tells us that as Christians we are all 'morning people.' The time is just before dawn, the sky is brightening, the alarm is ringing, day is at hand. It is time to rouse our minds from slumber, to be alert to what God is doing in the world, and to live in accordance with God's coming salvation."*

Indeed, it is God's *ongoing* act of creating that assures us of the hope something good is yet to come. We don't have to be discouraged from all the disconcerting news; or lose hope that humanity can't save itself.

Even natural disasters can't stop the overwhelming power of love to shine light on the better side of humanity.

Tomorrow buried under the current news feeds coming out of Florida and the Caribbean, we as a nation will recognize 16 years since 9/11.

What happened to us on September 11, 2001 still affects our international policies, how we get on and off airplanes, how authentically we welcome strangers, and how deeply involved we get in cultures and countries that see things differently than we do.

Do our neighbors across the seas see us as generous, loving and kind? Or do they see something quite different?

What I choose to take away from that horrible morning 16 years ago is that my actions and my choices and my beliefs must always show to the world that I love Jesus and I love my neighbor as myself ... and if more and more people do the same then we should all be able to get out of bed each morning with integrity and hopefulness.

The church of Jesus Christ has an awesome and wonderful gift to offer people who find the world overwhelming and distrustful.

As followers of Jesus we are called to share that awesome and wonderful gift.

One tangible way we are doing that is by collecting items for Flood Buckets (or Cleaning Kits as UMCOR calls them).

These buckets are more than laundry detergent, sponges and dust masks! They are concrete things we can touch and smell and see ... things we know will be appreciated by someone whose life has been disrupted by natural disasters.

We do essentially the same thing when we gift items to the Blessing Box!

For a follower of Jesus there is no time to waste. The Apostle Paul was adamant that in order to be prepared for that inevitable day when Christ will return ... it is imperative a true disciple must always be ready.

A disciple seeks ways to fulfill the law to love one another.

We share a faith that should not be kept hidden or so deeply personal know one knows we have faith. People should be able to see how we act and react and say, “hmmmm, they must be Jesus followers.”

One insightful blogger who read the reading from Matthew understands the message as one of hope. Mary Hinkle says:

*"Our hope for the sharing of the good news of Jesus Christ is not that Peter or the rest of us who are fishing for people will get better, clearer, louder, quieter, more trusting, or less cowardly ... but that God will keep revealing Godself and mercy and justice will rule through Jesus to human beings quite apart from their goodness, clarity, trust and courage."* [Mary Hinkle, *Pilgrim Preaching.*]

What is church?

Church is the united belief that it is Jesus' powerful message of love that throws back the bed covers, opens the window shades and welcomes the day.

Church is where two or three people (even when they haven't always agreed) can be reconciled and come together to worship God in spirit and in truth.

Church is the one place you can count on for healing the most discouraged and disheartened.

Let us wake up , get out of bed, and be the church together!

Amen.