

**Romans 13: 8-14**

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; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

**Matthew 18:15-20**

'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. 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. 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. 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. 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. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.'

**“Don't Laugh At Me”****September 7, 2008****Rev. Charles Schuster**

There's that choir over there in their new robes, my goodness. (Applause) Didn't they sing so much better because of those robes? They do have sort of a look sort of a KU blue, I don't know. Another thing I would like to do, we don't usually find the youth all in one place. They're all over. They spent the evening last night painting their rooms downstairs. Did you finish? You weren't painting your rooms downstairs? Well, you're all here. Would you stand? (Applause) Okay, sit down. And then come back and paint your rooms some time. They're remodeling the rooms in the basement. They've remodeled Club 56, the classroom we have for 5th and 6<sup>th</sup> graders. If you haven't seen it, it's spectacular, a lot going on.

Last Sunday afternoon I had the privilege of attending a major political event in Denver. The people there were equally divided in their opinion of things. Half of them wore black and gold and half of them wore green and yellow. I have to say I've never been to an event in which 35,000 people booed a sheep. There was a significant amount of name-calling, which I understand. These college rivalries are strong. I bought a book a couple weeks ago, it was in my office for one day, and then I gave it away. The title of the book

was *How I Have Learned to Hate and Am Loving It*. I bought it because it's about the Duke North - Carolina basketball rivalry. But then I looked at it more carefully and realized it was written by a Tarheel. And I'm a Blue Devil. So I gave it to a Tarheel graduate. I hope they enjoy it. I needed to get it out of my office.

A week from next Thursday night, West Virginia University, that's my *alma mater*, an undergraduate *alma mater*, will play Colorado in football in Boulder. We will see how hard they laugh at the mountaineer because he has a gun. I graduated from WVU. One of my relatives who lives in Morgantown got us four tickets. My daughter and wife and son-in-law and I will be in the stadium, helping influence the outcome. And I'm going to buy them WVU baseball caps. My son-in-law is a CU fan, and I asked him if maybe just this once he could cheer for West Virginia. He's from New England, which explains a lot, and you know what he said to me when I offered to buy him a baseball cap that had WVU on it, West Virginia University? He said, "If I wear a West Virginia hat, does it matter that my parents aren't related?" He can get his own hat, and I'm not sitting near him.

Name-calling, it's everywhere. Archbishop of Canterbury caught a train in London several years ago, and he got onto the wrong car. It was a medical car. It was a group of patients from the mental hospital, and they're all dressed in hospital garb, and he was dressed in his blue clerical robes, looked a little like our choir this morning. Just as the train pulled out of the station, the conductor and aids who were with the patients began counting them. One, two, three, four, then he paused as he noticed the distinguished looking gentleman with the clerical collar, and he said, "Who are you?" and the answer "I'm the Archbishop of Canterbury, I'm the head of the Church of England, sir." And the orderly continued, "five, six...."

Don't call me names. It's not just for children, or youth. Garrison Keillor was being interviewed one day on a radio talk show, and this is how he was introduced. "I understand that you drifted into manhood with the charm of a claims adjuster, and that you have a withering sense of guilt due to a good upbringing, and I'm told that in high school you tried to escape your unworthiness by affecting a sort of wispy bohemianism, writing your name in lower-case letters and composing dippy poems with titles like, "Soliloquies for Stringless Guitars." I understand that people who know you have described you as moody and inarticulate, a guy with cold green eyes and a ratlike smile who suffers good fortune with ill humor. All of which has left you virtually friendless, isolated, adrift, and out of touch, and you have lost 32 points of IQ in the past twenty years, and you were only average to begin with. Here's my question. Does loss of brain function justify persistence in the face of a certain pointlessness to one's life?" That's name-calling, on an adult level.

Don't laugh at me. Don't take pleasure from my pain. I'm the little boy with glasses, I'm the little girl with braces on my teeth. I'm fat, I'm thin, I'm tall, I'm deaf, I'm blind – hey, aren't we all. But they laugh at you. If your mind is sharp, they call you geek. If you got talent, they call you proud. If you're clumsy, they call you a klutz and choose you last. If you go to church, they call you a fanatic, and if you don't go to church they call

you a heathen from hell. There are two things I want to say in addressing this issue today, two things about what I think is a sad, mad, sometimes bad world. The first thing to say is, when it gets bad, you don't have to take it. You don't have to take it when they call you a name. You don't have to accept it. If they laugh at you, if they call you a name you can make it a game and turn that name into some fame. You don't have to take it. All of us can do it, one way or another.

Mary did it. Mary just wanted to be a writer, that's all, a writer. She wrote a short story she thought was pretty good. She submitted it to be published and she got letters back. Most of the letters were kind, things like, "Not at this time," or, "We have a limited opportunity of publication and we can only choose a few, and yours, though good, was not one chosen." Or, "Having read your short story, I realize that our company is moving in a different direction, but don't give up." Forty rejection letters. So far I got twenty on mine, so she was ahead of me. One of them called her a name, said to Mary she was light, slight, and trite. Well, she wrote a novel about the relationship between George and Martha Washington, big thick book, sent it in, self-published, it didn't sell. She went into business for herself, teaching people how to write, and then she wrote a suspense mystery, *Where are the Children?* And Mary Higgins Clark got noticed, and her name that they gave her provided the incentive to keep going, and now she's written many books, and some of them are movies. Light, trite, slight, indeed.

They said when he sang that he sounded like Alvin and the Chipmunks. Joel, he just – no, not the one you know – he just wanted to sing. Made a demo tape, hired a drummer, and he called himself Zatilla. He cut a CD, it didn't sell. Alvin and the Chipmunks. Joel. It was devastating, he was deeply depressed, in fact he spent some time in a psych ward in the darkest time of his life, and he wrote notes, reflections. He moved to California and he worked at a piano bar and changed his name to Billy Martin, and then he put those words to song, those words that he had written in the psychiatric ward, about despair and meaninglessness and death and suicide. "Tomorrow is Today." And then he gave up his new name and went back to his old name, and it wasn't Alvin, it was Joel. Billy Joel. What made him what he is, what drove him to what he became, they called him names. He made it his fame. Billy Joel is a singer, and he didn't start the fire. Calling him Alvin did.

History is moved forward by people who were laughed at, and who took their name and made their fame, turning mockery into a motto. They laughed at the Wesley brothers, preaching on the street corners, standing up to the Church of England, starting out in the early hours praying and swaying in a faith that was alive. They called them "enthusiasts." They called them "Bible moths." They called them "method maniacs," they called them "methodists." Their mockery became a motto. The name became their fame. And those followers of Jesus, to say he was the savior, claim he was the savior, humiliated at a trial, debased by soldiers, disgraced to carry his own cross, died between two thieves, nothing left of him except his followers knew somehow he was alive, there was resurrection, and where two or three are gathered in his name, their Savior lived. This Savior lives. Christos, Christ-bearers, Christians. It was a mockery. It became a motto. The name became their fame. Don't laugh at me, but if you do, I'll find a way. Your mockery will

become my motto. I cannot stop you from laughing at me, but I don't have to accept your silly taunts as true. You may find me strange according to your definition of normalcy, but that doesn't mean you're right. I don't have to take it. I don't have to live like it matters. If you find a name, I can play your game, and I can be in some fame.

Another thing I want to say, you don't have to take it. The second thing I want to say in this mad, sad and sometimes bad world, I don't have to take it, but I sure don't want to make it worse, and I am compelled, if possible, to make it better. Paul said, "Don't be a stumbling block, a hindrance in any manner to another person." You don't owe anyone anything except to love one another. Put aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.

Dinah Reeves wrote, "The idea of being excluded or shunned or ridiculed or ostracized or even assaulted by someone else, if that means you can respond with vengeance and violence, it is a self-degrading idea that we embrace, creating a cure that's worse than the cause." Today there is a climate created by the November elections. It's become so bad, I heard a member of the church say this the other day, just this past week, with all the political ads and the innuendoes and all the stuff that's in them that I hear on radio and television, it's the first time I can remember looking forward to hearing Jake Jabs try to get me to buy his furniture. I like what Adlai Stevenson said when he was running for the presidency, he said, "The hardest thing about any political campaign is how to win without proving yourself to be unworthy of winning." And you've heard me quote Jay Leno, who said, "If God had wanted us to vote, God would have given us candidates."

And see, therein is the problem. God does want us to vote in this mad, sad, bad world. To make a difference for God. Let's not make it worse, let's try to make it better. In an atmosphere of hostile political rhetoric, let's focus on the importance of the issue, not the assassination of the characters. In a time when candidates seem to be in a steady competition to bring notoriety to the common good, let us hold ourselves accountable to a level of civility that at some point in the future our grandchildren, maybe our great-grandchildren, if they decide to enter public life, we can encourage them to do it.

There's a story that James Moore tells. A police officer is on the witness stand, testifying at a trial, a man who had been arrested for robbery, and he was being cross-examined by a defense attorney who had the reputation for being tough. "Officer, did you see with your own eyes my client committing the crime?" "No sir, I didn't, but my partner did." "Well, if you didn't see him commit the crime, why did you arrest him?" "Because my partner entered the front of the store, and I came in the back of the store, and my partner saw him take the money out of the safe, and he ran, and my partner pointed to me, and so I ran after him and I chased him, and I tackled him, and I arrested him." "So you trust your partner that much, that you act only on his word." "Yes sir, I trust all the officers I work with. I trust them with my life." "With your life. Well, you have a room at the station where you change your clothes in preparation for work. Do you have a locker in that room?" "Yes, sir." "And do you have a lock on that locker, and do you keep your locker locked?" "Yes, sir." "Could you explain to me and to the court, why is it, if you trust the other officers with your very life, you find it necessary to lock your locker in the

room you share with those same officers?” Skillful cross-examination. It threatened the credibility of the police. But the officer had one last response, in an effort to bring clarity to the debate and credibility to the police force, so as not to make matters worse, he said, “Well sir, we share this building with the legal community, and sometimes lawyers walk through here. So that’s why we keep locks on our lockers.”

I do a little better for lawyers, a little later.

Andy Rooney tried to make it better, in this sad, mad and sometimes bad world when he said, “We can learn a lot from crayons. Some are sharp and some are pretty and some are dull and some have weird names and all have different colors, but they all have to learn to live in the same box.” What it means to be Christian in a sad, mad and sometimes bad world is, we try to make it better. There’s a story of a wholesaler in New York who sent a letter to a postmaster in a small midwestern town, probably in Kansas, and he asked for the name of an honest lawyer who would take a collection case against a local debtor who had refused to pay for a shipment of goods and this is the letter: “Dear Sir, I’m the postmaster of the village, and I’ve received your letter. I’m also an honest lawyer, and ordinarily I would be pleased to accept this case against the local creditor. This time, however, I am the person to whom you sold your crummy merchandise. I received your bill to pay and I refused to honor it, and I also am the banker you sent the draft to withdraw money from my account, and I sent that bill with a note stating that the merchant refused to pay it. If it were not for the fact that, for the time being, I’m a substitute pastor at the United Methodist Church, I would tell you where you could stick your claim.”

Don’t make it worse. Marsha Sinetar in her book *A Way Without Words* writes, “Ordinary, everyday people can and do become whole. We can and do live in ways that express our highest and most cherished values, values which happen to be those most highly praised universally and collectively and throughout history.” And Leo Buscaglia said it, “Don’t spend your precious time asking, ‘Why isn’t the world better?’ It will only be time wasted. The question to ask is, ‘How can I make it better?’” And to that there is an answer. It’s a sad, mad and sometimes bad world. Don’t laugh at me. Don’t call me names. But if you do, I make a game and take your name to make my fame. I don’t have to take it. But I do have to make it. I do have to make sure it won’t get worse, and try to make it better. Don’t laugh at me. Don’t laugh at her. Don’t laugh at him. Because we’re all God’s children, and God doesn’t like it when we’re laughed at.