

“The Hammer Nap”

Romans 13:8-14

In the film, “The Truman Show,” Truman, the main character (played by Jim Carrey), has a phrase that he repeats each morning: “Good morning. And in case I don’t see ya; Good afternoon, good evening and good night.” It’s a pleasantry, a greeting, a parting word before he hit the road.

What do you say when you leave your home in the morning? Do you say Good morning and how are you? Or do you get a little more personal like “I love you,” or “you’re special.” Or are you a bit more instructional, like “be good,” or “remember to take the trash out?” When you head out the door in the morning, or say goodbye to someone you care for – what do you say in that brief moment? I guess it depends on who it is.

If it’s your child, then I suppose you would be little more instructional. If it’s your spouse or girlfriend, perhaps it would be more affectionate. And if it was a good friend, you’d probably be more encouraging. But whatever you would say, you’d probably keep it short and you wouldn’t waste a lot of words. You’d be clear. You’d be simple.

The passage that was just read was taken from a letter written by The Apostle Paul to a group of Christians in the city of Rome. Paul has never met these believers before, but he is making plans to visit them soon. So, Paul’s letter is all about preparing them for his visit. In that letter, Paul addresses Jewish Christian relations and some of the richest theology you will find in all of Scripture.

Towards the end of the letter, Paul begins to wrap things up and say goodbye, laying out for the community of Christians the way they ought to live. In contrast with the rest of the letter, Paul’s language becomes simpler and more concise, almost as if he is sensing the inevitable doom – that he would not get to Rome and that he needed to tell them as much as he could in the limited amount of time that he had.

The passage that was just read, Romans 13:8-14, is just a small piece of what Paul had to say.

“Owe no one anything, except to love one another.”

The phrase is less about money and economic conditions and more about the obligation we have as Christians

to love one another. It is a bill we receive each day. It can never be paid off. We can never burn the note for this one. We will always be expected to love. We never retire from it and we are never excused from it. We must always love.

And when I say love, I mean putting aside our own desires in order to meet the needs of others. When I say love, I mean sticking beside someone even when you don't feel affection. When I say love, I mean going out of your way to serve someone. When I say love, I mean caring enough to confront someone when you know their actions could hurt them and themselves. When I say love, I mean a full-time, lifelong, whole-hearted kind of living.

And Paul points out that this kind of love encapsulates and sums up The Law and The 10 Commandments. Paul points out that following "The Golden Rule" – the law of Christ which tells us to love our neighbor as ourselves – is the most important code of ethics we can follow.

Because when we love our neighbor we're not going to murder, covet, steal or commit adultery.

During the morning meeting after an embarrassing loss to an inferior football team, Vince Lombardi the legendary coach of the Green Bay Packers, stood before his team and

said to his team, "Okay men, we're getting back to basics."

And then he held a football in the air and said, "Gentlemen, this is a football!" And then he said it again. And again. And again. Over and over he shouted, "Gentlemen, this is a football!" Sometimes we can get so consumed by the complexities and the ancillary things of life that we forget the most basic and most significant of all principles.

"Gentlemen, this is a football!"
"Brothers and sisters, love one another."

And sometimes, that simple rule is enough to wake us up, to get us moving, to spark us into action. And Paul runs with this, and says, love one another and wake up! Wake up from your sleep because we are very close to the day of salvation. The night is far gone. The day is near.

Paul is using code language here that is well known to all believers. Sleep, to a believer meant inattentiveness, it meant being unprepared and unready. It meant laziness and lax living and morality.

And the nighttime was a time of shadows. It was a time when you could do the things you wanted to do; things that you would never want to do in the daylight because it would be too shameful. You could drink hard

and live hard and no one would notice it. You could sleep around and you could fight and live as you wanted to live.

Paul urges the believers to not live this way and to instead live like the sun was shining, as if your actions could be seen and your thoughts discerned. Live as though you everyone could see everything about you.

When I was a boy, I remember that my mother would keep a dish of foil-wrapped chocolates in a dish during the holidays. Now, it was made very clear to us, “These, Jimmy and David, are for our guests. You may not have them.”

Well, one day, my mother discovered that several... many... chocolates were missing from the dish. And so, the interrogation began. “David, did you eat the chocolates?” No. “Jimmy, did you eat the chocolates?” No.

The search for evidence began. Mom, looked in our room. In the bathroom. In the kitchen and behind... the... sofa... and there she found scraps of red, blue and green foil. The evidence was found. My brother confessed. He had been snatching up chocolates and hiding behind the couch to enjoy the fruits of his disobedience.

I’d like to say that we outgrow this tendency to lurk in the shadows to enjoy what we shouldn’t be doing. But, we don’t. The fact is, we avoid the light and dread the day. We prefer the night, the shadows, the darkness because that’s where we can live without fear. We don’t have to worry about being criticized or judged. We don’t have to worry about being scrutinized, exposed or publicized.

But Paul says for us to live as though our private actions are public. Live wide open. Let your actions and activity be accessible with no passwords and no restrictions.

Paul says to put on your armor of light. In other words, protect yourself from the affects of this world, but let them see you coming! You should be visible and vibrant, bright and bold. You should be strong and ready, fearless and illuminating.

“Put on Jesus Christ,” Paul says. Wear Jesus as though he were a football jersey that stated your identity. Wear Jesus as if it was the first thing people would see about you. Wear Jesus as if you were awake, ready for a day of work or play.

One of the most timeless prayers of our faith came from St. Patrick who lived among a people fearful of every superstition and disease. The prayer he taught to his people has been

passed down through the generations and is called today, "The Breastplate of St. Patrick." Here's an excerpt:

I arise today, through God's strength to pilot me:
God's might to uphold me, God's wisdom to guide me,
God's eye to look before me, God's ear to hear me,
God's word to speak for me, God's hand to guard me,
God's way to lie before me, God's shield to protect me,
God's host to secure me:
against snares of devils, against temptations of vices,
against inclinations of nature, against everyone who shall wish me ill, afar and anear, alone and in a crowd.

Christ with me, Christ before me,
Christ behind me, Christ in me,
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ on my right,
Christ on my left, Christ in breadth,
Christ in length,
Christ in height, Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of every man who speaks of me,
Christ in every eye that sees me,
Christ in every ear that hears me.

That's what it means to put on an armor of light and to "put on Jesus." It means to recognize the leadership of Christ in your life. It means we see Christ in everything we do, standing

ready for the coming of Jesus. And when he does return we want to stand ready before him with a clear conscience, unashamed, and completely open to God and the salvation God gives to us, gleaming with the armor of light.

Several years ago, Heather and I lived next door to a single dad named Chad Maxcy. Chad stood about 6 feet tall, he had a thick black mustache, an even thicker Texas drawl and knack for telling stories.

One day I knocked on Chad's door to ask him for cup of sugar or an extension cord (I'm not sure), and he came to the door with puffy eyes and tousled hair. I had clearly awakened Chad in the middle of the afternoon. "Chad," I asked, did I wake you?" "Aw that's alright," Chad said, "I was just taking a 'Hammer Nap.'" "A 'Hammer Nap'?" I asked, "What's that?"

He proceeded to tell me about how his dad would come in after a hard morning of work in the fields and, after lunch, he would lay down on the couch with a hammer in his hand. And he would hold it just so. And then as he would drift into sleep he would slowly relax his grip on the handle. And then, right at the edge of deep sleep, the hammer would drop and – BAM! The hammer would hit the ground and Chad's dad would be

up and ready to go for another day of hard work. That's a Hammer Nap.

Romans chapter 13, verses 8 through 14 – the passage we just read – is the Christian “Hammer Nap.” It's a short, concise thunderclap. It's not complex, it's not dense. It's a BAM! for the church and a BAM! for us as believers.

The academic year may begin with a day of rest called Labor Day, but we as a church begin the season of our lives with a BAM! A reminder that loving one another is the one thing that's truly important. A reminder of the posture and attitude we must embrace as Christians – that we are to be awake and alert and ready. We are not sleepyheads or “come-what-may-who-gives-a-damn” kind of people. We are awake and we are expected to live that way.

On Friday, Chilson Hills Church lost one of its great saints. Actually, to put a finer point on it, Chilson Hills Church lost its big sister. Nikki Qualls was our spark, our party planner, our “quarter master,” our frontline general who led us and walked with us.

Many were with her when she died on Friday afternoon, but many were not. For those of you who were there – you will never forget that moment for as long as you live. For those of you

who weren't, I thought you might like to know what she had to say.

Nikki had been unconscious for a day and a half. Her breathing had become increasingly labored and increasingly shallow. Her bald head dipped down and her chin hung between her shoulder and her sternum. There was no doubt that the end was near; we just didn't know when that end would come.

A nurse then came in to swab her lips which Nikki seemed to subtly respond to previously. But this time, when the moisture touched her dry lips and tongue her body sprang into action. She sat up with her eyes wide open and her mouth agape. And she trembled ever-so slightly. And then she slumped back into the bed and breathed a few more times... and was gone.

The doctors called it a seizure. I don't know what it was. But I'd like to think it was Nikki's last message to us as a congregation – the people she loved with all her heart.

“Wake up!” She said that afternoon. “Wake up!” Live your life wide awake, fully-alive, vibrant and ready. Love your neighbor! Live honorably! Love Jesus and show Jesus to all the world! But please, brothers and sisters, don't stay asleep. Wake up!

I can't tell you how many stories I heard about Nikki from her friends and family over the past couple of days. And how many stories I heard that about Nikki and her unwillingness to become stagnant or grow lazy. I can't tell you how many stories I heard about Nikki and her difficulty with sleep. She just wanted to live her life awake, conscious and active. And when Nikki shot up in bed that Friday afternoon as if she had been awakened by a hammer slamming to the ground, Nikki made it clear that she would not die sleeping, she would die awake, eyes wide open and mouth ready to speak.

We brothers and sisters who are left here on this world to finish the work of Christ should do the same. We must wake up from our "Hammer Nap" to love one another and live in the light of Christ.