

**The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza**  
**The Church of the Good Shepherd**  
**Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost – September 10, 2017**  
**Romans 13:8-14**

*Holy Spirit of God, may the refining fire of Your love reach into our hidden, inmost places and make us one Spirit with you; in the name of God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Good morning. My name is Christine Mendoza and my family and I come to you from Austin, in the Diocese of Texas. Now, I know you want me just to tell all about myself and my family, but I think I need to preach the Word a bit first. I know, I know... what a downer. But, sometimes what a preacher preaches and the way she preaches reveal even more about a person. So, here goes.

Paul's message to the Church in Rome (and to us) is a call to love. Paul writes, "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law."<sup>1</sup> Owe no one anything except love. Paul's use of the verb "owe" comes across in English as if Paul were talking about a financial debt. That we shouldn't owe each other money or some other commodity. But Paul is really talking about something more like "obligation." So, in this way, Paul is exhorting the early Christians to honor first and foremost the obligation to love one another.

To love one another. This truly forms the heart of Christianity. Jesus declared that to be his disciples, to live, participate, and be caught up in the way of life that he embodied, we are to love. Indeed, Jesus reduces the whole of the Hebrew Law – all 613 laws of the Torah – to the simplicity of loving God with all our heart and mind and soul, and to love one another as oneself. In the Gospel of John on that fateful night before his arrest and passion, Jesus upped the ante on this by giving his disciples a new commandment, one that is more simple and yet even more challenging: to love one another as he loved them.

While simple, this charge is most certainly not easy. This is largely why God gave Moses the Law in the first place – because without perfect love, we are not able to live love fully. And the fact is, we need some more direction about what that life might look like. It seems that left to our own devices, we are not quite clear about living and giving love fully in community looks like.

The Mosaic law given us from God reveals that living love in community looks like honoring our elders and all those who teach, guide, and nurture us in our lives. It looks like caring for the vulnerable and needy – all those on the margins who need our protection, shelter, kindness, and aid. It looks like working and resting – and expecting those who serve us and serve alongside us to do the same. It looks like not harming others – not intentionally wounding another physically, emotionally, or spiritually. It also looks like honoring and praising God individually as well as worshipping within community,

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 13:8; NRSV

I believe that in order to take seriously God's charge to "love your neighbor as yourself," it requires that we see – truly see – our neighbor. Presbyterian minister and writer Frederick Buechner wrote this: "When Jesus comes along saying that the greatest command of all is to love God and to love our neighbor, he too is asking us to pay attention. "If we are to love God, we must first stop, look, and listen for him in what is happening around us and inside us. If we are to love our neighbors, before doing anything else we must see our neighbors. With our imagination as well as our eyes, that is to say like artists, we must see not just their faces, but the life behind and within their faces. Here it is love that is the frame we see them in." <sup>2</sup>

Love is the frame in which we are to see each other, as well as our neighbor. It's how God see us. I believe the greatest gift we can give to another is to see them... to know them as they are, as both sinner and saint. And to love them. This vision, this "seeing" and "knowing" is love in community. I believe that everyone here, everyone everywhere, desires to know and be known.

Over this next year, and in the years that follow, I look forward to getting to know you – to see you. I want to hear your stories and I want to share mine. I want to hear your stories of triumph, great love, and how God has brought about surprising new life in your lives and loves. I also want to hear your stories of failure, sorrow, suffering, and disappointment. I want to hear how God might have been working through all of that as well.

I think that in order to be a community that sees and knows each other, we must see and know ourselves. We have to learn how to tell our stories – to share our lives, with all our joys and sorrows, with each other. It sounds like it would be so simple, after all these are our stories, but it is often more difficult than you'd think. Practically nothing in our culture supports real truth-telling and sharing of ourselves with vulnerability.

To know and be known, we must open ourselves to another – we must take that risk that the other may laugh at us, or reject us. Telling our stories requires that we humble ourselves and make ourselves vulnerable. This does not come naturally or easily to most adults (or youth, for that matter). We have many years of defense mechanisms in place to prevent getting hurt, but these defenses also prevent others from getting close enough to love us fully.

I believe we must learn how to tell our stories, if for no other reason than to know them. We all have stories that operate below the surface of our lives that exert great influence over how we live and move and have our being. We need to know them. We may be surprised by what we discover. We may find that the story from which we function is no longer relevant. We may find it is time to let that story go and to write a new one that is more true to who and how we are now.

In the coming Sundays, I will share various parts of my story. Hopefully, you will receive them as the gifts they are intended to be. This is my story and I have no expectations that yours will be the same. But I want to share them with you because that is one way that I can love you. I want you to see me – see me not only as your Rector, Pastor, and Priest, but see me also as a fellow disciple joining you along the Way of Jesus. A disciple with my own peculiar mix of the brokenness of this mortal life and strength that comes from healing.

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<sup>2</sup> Buechner, Frederick; *Whistling in the Dark*

So, let me start with just the barest peak at my story – let me re-introduce myself. My name is Christine. I am a mother, wife, daughter, friend, and priest. With humility and great excitement, I have accepted your call to be your next Rector and I cannot express how happy I am to be here, with you, today. My family and I have moved to Northern Virginia just three weeks ago from Austin, which has been our home for a long time.

My husband's name is Jonathan. He was born and spent his early years in Mexico City. At the age of 14, he came to the States, moving to McAllen, Texas. He graduated from the University of Texas at Austin and works professionally as a Technical Writer. Besides his family, Jonathan's real passion is soccer. In Austin, he played on a number of teams with the same group of men for 25 years! And he's looking for some teams to meet and practice with, so be sure to tell him if you know of any.

Jonathan and I met in Austin and have been married for 18 years. We have one fabulous daughter, Emma, who is the light of our lives. This year, Emma started ninth grade at Woodson High School. Emma is a gifted artist and guitarist, and she is a lovely, caring, intelligent, and funny person. Both Emma and Jonathan look forward to becoming a part of this Good Shepherd parish family.

I was born in San Antonio, Texas, on an Easter Sunday, when the Hill Country wildflowers were in full bloom. I was raised in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and my family still lives in the area. I graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill with a bachelor's degree, majoring in Comparative Religious Studies. This was a curious turn of events because I was raised entirely unchurched by agnostic parents. Yet I have always felt God's call to me. For decades, I tried to find my way to God – fumbling around, directionless. It wasn't until I completely fell apart and there was no longer enough of me left to get in my own way that I discovered that God had been right there with me all along.

From this discovery and from the love and grace of God poured out upon me so abundantly, I learned that our God is a God who brings new life out of dead things. I learned how it is that Jesus can say that the Kingdom of God is in-breaking in our midst – right now – even as we await its coming in fullness. I am one who is living a resurrected life today and I yet I am continually being transformed by God's grace. When I am able to see myself clearly through the frame of love, I am able to recognize how the Spirit is moving and working in my life, as well as in the world around me, all the time. It is in those very moments that I am given a taste of the kingdom of God.

For today, let us rejoice in all the ways that the Spirit is moving in our lives. Let us celebrate and give thanks for God's continual work of transformation in us, each other, and our communities. Let us take on the mind of Christ – the mind of love – and allow ourselves to be transformed over time into Christ's own image. Let us learn how to tell our stories and share them with each other. May we be a community in which each one of us is able to see and be seen, know and be known – seeing in each other the life behind and within our faces.

Amen.