

FONTHILL UNITED CHURCH - Sermon for Sunday September 13, 2020
15th Sunday after Pentecost

WORSHIP FOCUS: “Armour”

The appeal of perfume is that it is at once ephemeral and empowering. It creates a shimmering invisible armour that lingers in a room long after its wearer has gone and infuses our imagination with a subtle power, hinting at a hidden identity.

~Mary Gaitskill

1st LESSON: Romans 13: 8-14 (NRSV)

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 quarreling and jealousy.

Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

2nd LESSON: Matthew 18: 15-20 (NRSV)

Jesus said: “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.”

REFLECTION: “Love’s Armour”

In the front hall closet of my twin sister’s home in Ottawa, hangs an old beaver coat with a mink collar. On cold winter Ottawa days, my sister actually wears this coat. Even though she knows that she risks being accosted by an animal rights activist when she does, she wears this coat because it is warm. The coat envelopes my tiny sister. When she wears it she is armoured against the cold. And when she slips the coat on, she catches the faint smell of Chanel #5, humbugs and DuMaurier lights.

The classic theological stance used to interpret the little bit of Paul that we have read today about putting on the armour of light, and the little bit of Matthew that was read today about whatever

we have bound on earth being bound in heaven, and whatever we have loosed on earth being loosed in heaven, is the idea articulated by St Patrick so many centuries ago, and found in his famous prayer, The Lorica, or Breastplate. You all know this prayer. Sometimes we sing it in church. Our Call to Worship today, which starts with and repeats the formulaic expression, 'I take to myself,' echoes St Patrick's words, "I bind unto myself I bind to myself to-day, the strong power of the invocation of the Trinity: The faith of the Trinity in the Unity, The Creator of the elements."

I bind unto myself today. . . .

Binding. Being bound. Being tied up with. Held captive. Drawn tightly together. Perhaps becoming comingled. Finding ourselves in that messy place where we are unsure where one thing starts and the other begins. Perhaps, as in the case of the elements, bound together so strongly that we become something else, a compound, held together by covalent bonds that only a power greater than us can sever. Obligated. Beholden. Responsible. Worried for. Concerned. Implicated. Enmeshed.

There is a whole bunch about being bound that we do not like. There is a part of being bound that just sounds nasty.

Indeed, there are many people who, when they think about being bound, recoil. When we date, or go out and are introduced to new people, all of us have had the experience of meeting someone who does not want to be tied. We all know people who do not want drama. We all know good-time people, who are always around, who smile, who say the polite things, who hover around our circle, never moving very far from the periphery, who, under no circumstance, have any intention of moving from the edges into the heart of our social group, and becoming bound.

Don't give me a job on the committee. Don't call me, I'll call you. I don't like to make plans, I'm spontaneous. No, we don't need to meet in the in-between, let's just keep picking up where we left off. I'm not looking for a commitment.

Do you know people like this? Are you sometimes a person like this?

Recently, a member of Fonthill United Church was talking about relationships with me. This person said, "Yes, it is nice to meet people. It is easy to meet people and to get attached to them. But it is very hard to get rid of them. That is the problem."

Certainly for many of us, there are times when we do not have the energy to bind ourselves to another, and worry about the messy consequences. There are times when we need to have purely transactional relationships with the people we meet: to buy our groceries from Sobeys, be friendly -- but not too friendly -- with the checkout clerk, and then high tail it home.

This is okay sometimes, but it not okay all of the time. We all know people who have chosen never to allow themselves to be bound to anything or anyone. And if we have known them for years, we come to realize that the benefits of the freedom and independence they have worked so hard to maintain, often pale with time, and that people who do not allow themselves to be bound to others can often end up spectacularly alone, wondering bitterly why this is so.

Chanel N^o5. Humbugs. DuMaurier Lights. When my sister puts on the old beaver coat, the effect is not just the physical sensation of warmth. She is transported. She is back in the living room of a house on Dalegrove Crescent, forty years ago. The humbugs are in the white glass dish sitting

on the marble-topped table, the DuMaurier Lights are in a rose-coloured porcelain box beside a matching warmth lighter, and the woman sitting in the orange velvet slipper chair smells like Chanel N° 5. And my sister hears her voice, her laugh, her words of love as if it were yesterday.

St Patrick's Breastplate would have us believe that being bound is a choice, and that we buckle on the armour of love intentionally. And certainly there is a lot of this formal aspect of choice with regards to our spouses. We consider. We formally ask. We exchange rings. We say I do. Our marriage ceremony is an example when, before God, we formally bind what we do on earth with what is happening in heaven.

But the truth is that the way love works, the way the armour of love works, is much more automatic. Love is like a vine. It has fast growing tendrils that reach up and embrace us. They tighten imperceptibly. And, before we know it, we are bound.

Sex binds us.

Co-habiting binds us.

Shared friends bind us.

Going out together for dinner binds us.

That time that we got a flat driving to Kapuskasing binds us.

Going to the library every Friday morning binds us to all the people who also go to the library on Friday mornings.

Having another person look into our eyes and see us, binds us.

Our decision to paint the back door green binds us.

Our children bind us.

I am reminded of how strongly we are bound together every time I am asked to preside at a funeral. Members of far-flung families, in which children and grandchildren and brothers and sisters are living all over the world, stop everything that they are doing, suddenly coordinate their schedules, and make plans to meet at the graveside. And when I meet these people, who sometimes have not seen each other for years, it is clear that they are bound to each other in profound ways. They clasp each other. They wipe the tears from each other's eyes. They share stories that only they know and which only have meaning and nuance for them. In the releasing of their loved one in the act of committal, the bonds that hold them to their loved one so securely in this life are palpable. You can feel the energy that holds those assembled together so powerfully, as they allow the temporal bond that holds them together to be released, and that energy shifts, and moves heavenwards.

When Paul writes in Romans, "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord," he is talking about this kind of being bound. He is talking about the love that will not let us go.

Our readings today remind us of all the relationships we live into and all the wonderful ways they can bind us. How, instead of being something to be avoided, relationships and their ties have the potential to lift us up and make us more. They remind us that becoming an adherent to a religion, like Christianity, is a kind of binding. *Religio*, a Latin word at the root of the word religion, simply means, I am bound.

Being bound in love. Wearing Christ's light. Being wrapped up in another so tightly that what happens on earth, is echoed in heaven. This is a good thing.

Chanel N°5. Humbugs. DuMaurier Lights. When I see my sister wear my grandmother's coat, I see my grandmother. I remember that she was the only person who ever called me Robbie. I remember that safe way I felt when I was with her. I remember her acceptance of me and how I always thought she understood. It is like it was yesterday. And when I talk to my sister about wearing that coat, she has a similar understanding of its power. The coat reminds us of how firmly we are bound to a woman who died forty years ago.

Covid-19. Zoom services. Coffee and cake served in backyards. Telephone chats with each other that never seem to end because we are so lonely. A newsletter called 'The Social Distancer.' Window visits. Trying to make sense of the outbreak at our neighbourhood Sobeys and the way it was reported on the National. Standing along Pelham Street watching a funeral procession go by. Waving to Louise sitting on a firetruck with Bruce's ashes on her lap.

Like it or not, we are being tied up together in the events that are shaping our world. Bless be the ties that bind. We could not do this alone. Together we are wearing the armour of light.