

Love Honorably  
Romans 13:8-14  
September 10, 2023  
First Presbyterian, Luling

When the kids were little, they were just like your kids, and every other kid on the planet, I expect. When we were going somewhere that was any further than five minutes away from home, the questions would begin: “How much longer?” “Are we there yet?” “How long is this gonna take?” I assume you’ve heard such questions before. Maybe you’ve even asked them yourself.

I don’t know what your approach to such questions has been. Mine varied. Sometimes I’d just say “40 minutes,” following the dubious example of our minister growing up. On long youth group road trips, that was his answer, no matter if it was 8 more hours or ten more minutes. 40 minutes. When they got a little older, I’d try to make them figure it out: it takes an hour to get to Luling. We’ve been driving 15 minutes, how many more minutes do we have? But I often pulled out this non-answer: “We’re getting closer!” Well, obviously. We’re getting closer every minute. Closer than we were a mile ago, not as close as we’ll be a mile down the highway. It was true, but it didn’t answer the question that was asked, “How much longer?”

When Paul tells the Romans, in verse 11, “For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers,” it hits me the same way. Well, no kidding. Salvation, eternal life, the other side, knowing God face to face is closer to us now, than when we first became believers, closer than it was yesterday. Less close than it will be tomorrow. It’s true, but it doesn’t really tell us anything we didn’t know, if we’d just stopped to think about it.

But what were the kids really asking in the car. Yes, how much longer till we get there, but also: what do we do right now? Should we ask for a restroom stop, or can we hold it? Hard to know, if you don’t know how much longer it will be. One time when I was the youth minister and was trying the “40 minutes” answer, a little sister who was on a trip with us said, “Monica, if we don’t get there in the next minute, my head is going to explode!” We were a good four hours away at that point, so I told her, “Well, that’s going to make a big mess, and then we’ll have to stop and clean up the car, and it’s going to take us even longer to get there.” Needless to say, we did not arrive in the next minute, her head did not explode, and the world kept turning. She was saying, goodness, this is taking a long time. I’m getting tired and bored and discouraged. I’m looking forward to the

end of the trip, but this endless day of driving is about to do me in. How much longer? And what am I supposed to do right now, to keep my head from exploding?

There are other places in the letters where Paul talks about his belief that Jesus would return soon, within Paul's own lifetime. It seems to be something that Paul really and truly sincerely believed, and so he instructed the communities of Christians, the newly forming churches, as if they were going to be in existence for just a few years. How much longer? Not too much longer.

The real question that the churches were asking Paul was, what are we supposed to be doing now? How do we prepare for salvation to come to us? If how much longer is not quite yet, then how do we remain faithful in the meantime?

Paul's answers in this passage are, first, much like what he said last week: love one another. And then he says to put on the armor of light, and to put on Jesus Christ. He tells the Romans to clothe themselves in Jesus Christ.

While the Roman Christians were waiting for the quickly approaching salvation, or while we are waiting for the slowly approaching salvation, Paul's instructions are to fulfill the law with loving their neighbor, which brings to mind that whole long list of instructions we read last week: let love be genuine, hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good, etc. All that instruction was about loving. We know that we're supposed to love. Jesus made that clear. Paul makes it clear. And Paul reminds us here that the law makes that clear, too. It shouldn't be a surprise that, as salvation approaches, we're supposed to love.

This put on the armor of light and put on the Lord Jesus Christ is a little bit of a different spin. When others observe the Christians, they should not just see people loving their neighbors, but they should see Jesus in the Christians. Clothe yourselves in Christ, so that everything you do become Christ's activity in the world. That's a heavy assignment.

Paul lines out some things he thinks that means. Discard behaviors like reveling, drunkenness, debauchery, licentiousness, quarreling, and jealousy. I don't know about you, but I have a harder time with some of those behaviors than others. Set aside those actions. There may be some other things we could think of that need to be abandoned in order to put on the armor of light and be clothed in Christ.

How much longer? Nobody knows, including Paul. It's closer today than it was yesterday, and not as close as it will be tomorrow. There are days, times, circumstances, situations, where we do feel like our heads might explode. But we

have clear instructions on what to do in the meantime, before we get there. What do we do now? Love our neighbors. Fulfill the law with love. Show the world what Jesus looks like, and how Jesus loves.