

Do you know what time it is?
Reading from the New Testament: Romans 13:8-14

Have you ever visited the quaint village of Eatanswill? My friend George Hudson recently shared with me an account of his visit there, the timing of which just happens to coincide with a spirited and contentious election season.

"It appears, then, that the Eatanswill people, like the people of many other small towns, considered themselves of the utmost and most mighty importance, and that every man in Eatanswill, conscious of the weight that attached to his example, felt himself bound to unite, heart and soul, with one of the two great parties that divided the town—the Blues and the Buffs. Now the Blues lost no opportunity of opposing the Buffs, and the Buffs lost no opportunity of opposing the Blues; and the consequence was, that whenever the Buffs and Blues met together at public meeting, town–hall, fair, or market, disputes and high words arose between them. With these dissensions it is almost superfluous to say that everything in Eatanswill was made a party question. If the Buffs proposed [to update the lighting] of the marketplace, the Blues got up public meetings, and denounced the proceeding; if the Blues

proposed the erection of an additional pump in the High Street, the Buffs rose as one and stood aghast at the enormity. There were Blue shops and Buff shops, Blue inns and Buff inns—there was a Blue aisle and a Buff aisle in the very church itself.

"Of course, it was essentially and indispensably necessary that each of these powerful parties should have its chosen organ and representative: and, accordingly, there were two newspapers in the town—the Eatanswill Gazette and the Eatanswill Independent; the former advocating Blue principles, and the latter conducted on grounds decidedly Buff. Fine newspapers they were. Such leading articles, and such spirited attacks!—‘Our worthless contemporary, the Gazette’—‘That disgraceful and dastardly journal, the Independent’—‘That false and scurrilous print, the Independent’—‘That vile and slanderous calumniator, the Gazette;’ these, and other spirit-stirring denunciations, were strewn plentifully over the columns of each, in every number, and excited feelings of the most intense delight and indignation in the bosoms of the townspeople."

[Now, George's traveling companion, a fellow by the name of] Pickwick, "with his usual foresight and sagacity, had chosen a

peculiarly desirable moment for his visit to the borough. Never was such a contest known. The Honourable Samuel Slumkey, of Slumkey Hall, was the Blue candidate; and Horatio Fizkin, Esq., of Fizkin Lodge, near Eatanswill, had been prevailed upon by his friends to stand forward on the Buff interest. The Gazette warned the electors of Eatanswill that the eyes not only of [the nation], but of the whole civilised world, were upon them; and the Independent imperatively demanded to know, whether the constituency of Eatanswill were the grand fellows they had always taken them for, or base and servile tools, undeserving alike of the name of [patriot] and the blessings of freedom. Never had such a commotion agitated the town before.

"The Pickwickians had no sooner [arrived] than they were surrounded by a branch mob of the honest and independent, who forthwith set up three deafening cheers.

‘Slumkey for ever!’ roared the honest and independent.

‘Slumkey for ever!’ echoed Mr. Pickwick, taking off his hat.

‘No Fizkin!’ roared the crowd.

‘Who is Slumkey?’ whispered [George].

‘I don’t know,’ replied Mr. Pickwick, in the same tone. ‘Hush. Don’t ask any questions. It’s always best on these occasions to do what the mob does.’

‘But suppose there are two mobs?’ suggested [George].

‘Shout with the largest,’ replied Mr. Pickwick." (Charles Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers*)

Now, my friend George didn't visit Eatanswill this summer during a presidential campaign stop. In fact, George's visit to Eatanswill didn't even occur in a wavering, unpredictable battleground state, like Wisconsin or Pennsylvania, but occurred, most likely, in a literature class. You see, the scene and setting described here is not 21st Century, mask-addled, middle America, but 19th Century England. Yet it reads like a present-day article you might flip through on your morning newsfeed.

Eatanswill (get it, Eat and Swill) is a product of creative satire from the mind of none other than Charles Dickens, who used the pen to speak truth to power, exquisitely excoriating the prevailing culture of England's parliamentary governance.

The Pickwick Papers was written in 1836. It reads like 2020. And it offers to us an unfriendly and unflattering mirror, exposing the ease

with which a population is manipulated and molded into a particular worldview without our even realizing it, to such an extent that what we support often bears no resemblance to what we say we value.

‘Who is Slumkey?’ whispered Mr. Tupman.

‘I don’t know,’ replied Mr. Pickwick, in the same tone. ‘Hush. Don’t ask any questions. It’s always best on these occasions to do what the mob does.’

‘But suppose there are two mobs?’ suggested Mr. Snodgrass.

‘Shout with the largest,’ replied Mr. Pickwick.

What an accurate portrayal of our current state of public discourse! Doesn't it strike you as a bit sad that the way we choose those who would lead us is so heavily dependent upon how horrid the candidates' teams can be during the campaign, how obnoxiously inaccurate they can be when portraying their opponent?

What is the reason for all the repugnance? Because it works. Malice gets the vote. Hostility, dysfunction, and rancor sell. Spite spikes the ratings, pumps the polls; which means, of course, we are as culpable as the purveyors for the oral pollution that clogs the various platforms to which we affix our ears and eyes in this age. Did you know 69% of adults say Reality TV is trashy and 72% of adults say it is fake, and yet

shows like the *Real Housewives* and Kardashian franchises consistently rank among the top ten in viewership. Just this week, guess who ABC recruited to boost the ratings of *Dancing with the Stars*? One of the crazed characters from *Tiger King*. A popular reality show borrows from an even more popular reality show to bolster ratings. Reality goes from Netflix to network. What's next? Will Carol Baskin, the *Tiger King* slayer, run for office? Taking advantage of their ability keep us glued to their pathology, increasingly, we watch the reality stars seamlessly make the jump into politics. The wild-eyed pro wrestler, Jesse Ventura, wasn't the first, and obviously is not the last to take the leap, aided and abetted by our insatiable appetite for dysfunction.

Toxicity draws a crowd. Truth, character, benevolence, and mercy don't seem to pay the bills. We're living it now, but it was no less true in Dicken's 19th Century, or Paul's 1st Century Rome. Writing to a new church rising in Rome, Paul instructs, "The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So, let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and

drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ..."

It may seem ironic that Paul offers this counsel following a paragraph where he advises them to be good citizens and pay their taxes, but as Fred Craddock points out, Paul is referring to an arrangement in which people pool their money for the common good, understanding that their welfare is wrapped up in the welfare of all; that leading life only as a commercial transaction, or as an *I've-got-mine, you're-on-your own* proposition, is an incubator for loneliness and mistrust. Therefore, Paul writes in Galatians, "do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another."

There is a whole lot of biting and devouring going on these days, just as was the case in Rome. Unfortunately, it is the vulnerable, the

disenfranchised, the excluded, and the poor who are most often are the ones being devoured, while the powerful just keep on biting.

Understand, Paul has no illusions about the virtue and honor of Rome, but he is convinced that even within deeply flawed institutions there is kingdom work to be done for the good of all. Just in the previous chapter, Paul instructs the Christian, "Let love be genuine. Hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good." In other words, in the midst of darkness, be the light. Swim against the tide of cynicism. Or as Mr. Rogers would say, "Look for the helpers," and join them. For when Paul says, "Love does no wrong to a neighbor," he is not merely suggesting the passive path of *do no harm*. Instead, Paul would echo Jesus who said, "If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return."

Wait a minute, "Love your enemies, do good!" Obviously, that is something we need to work on. Today, the highest rated news programs are not actually news programs, but are opinion programs, hosted by opinionators who lead with anger and cynicism, breeding anger and cynicism across the cultural and political spectrum. Again, Paul doesn't

call us to go along or run away. Rather, Paul calls the Christian to swim against the tide.

The youth in a congregation I served painted a mural on a wall with a school of fish blithely swimming along with the current down the river. But, if you look closely, you see one little goldfish swimming against the tide, upstream, and through the traffic jam of the crowd swimming the other way. "Love your enemies." "Owe no one anything, except to love one another." "Love does no wrong to a neighbor." In contrast to the way it is portrayed in contemporary society, love is not primarily an emotion. Fundamentally, love is an action performed for the benefit, the good of another, regardless of how you presently feel about them.

Putting on Christ, or clothing ourselves with Christ, as Paul pictures it, involves bearing love as lived out by Christ for the benefit of all, for the time in which we live.

Do you know what time it is? "Paul says, 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." Sure, Paul, and we'll have a vaccine in your hand by noon. The day is near? We're talking about 2020. Do you know what time it is? I read that if 2020 was a video game, right now would be the time where you randomly press buttons because you don't know what to do.

The answer is, yes, Paul knows what time it is. First Century Rome wasn't exactly a cakewalk for the multitude. Pax Romana was a little short on the Pax. Jerusalem was besieged, the holy temple destroyed, Rome burns, Nero commits suicide, and we killed Jesus. We killed Jesus, whose truth and love was more than we could bear. "And darkness covered the face of the earth." And yet, Christ's resurrection by the power of God's love means that no matter what the clock or calendar suggest, the dawning of God's kingdom is always near.

When I run these mornings as the days shorten, as I go out, it is dark except for the few stars visible in the suburban sky. However, as I return, it is still dark, but I can see hints of light and color in the eastern sky, signs of a glorious dawn.

Alicia Van Riggs, of Oakland, CA, commutes to work by bicycle, arriving very early around dawn. She says, "Years ago, on a very early

summer morning, I rode under a lavender velvet sky. It was breathtaking. Then above the western horizon, between the roofline of the car dealerships and scraggly urban redwood, I saw the full moon, golden and profuse." She got off her bike, stepped onto the sidewalk, and burst into tears at the unbidden beauty. She says, "I soon realized that I was also crying because so very early in the morning there was no one around to share the moon with me. Relationship is what makes so much of life so breathtakingly beautiful. Alone, I ached with an inability to fully bear witness." But just then, out of the corner of her eye, she saw an older man approach, pushing a shopping cart filled with overflowing garbage bags full of recyclables. He clanked down the street toward her and stopped. Alicia reports, "Noticing my streaky face, he asked if I was OK. I managed to nod. 'Yeah, it's just...'. She wiped her nose and jutted her chin toward the moon. "Oh wow," he said. "You're right." They stood there together on Broadway and regarded the moon. The man uncapped his Mountain Dew, took a drink, and then extended it to her. "Want some?"

Alicia says, "I still regret not accepting it. He was offering so much more than soda. He was welcoming me into our mutual yearning for

connection." (Alicia Van Riggs, *The Christian Century*) He was offering her communion at the dawn of a new day.

Paul says, "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." "Owe no one anything, except to love one another." Not mere sentiment, but action.

Let's be real, the current confluence of calamities portends a number of dark days before us. But, bathed in the light of Christ, you have both the opportunity and responsibility to be a bearer of light in a half-dark world. "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." Do you know what time it is? It's time to shine. Amen.