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**“The Armor of Light”
A sermon by Mindy Douglas**

**23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)
September 10, 2017
Romans 13:8-14**

This morning, as we gather, I cannot help but think of our friends who are not worshiping together this day because of the impending threat of Hurricane Irma. I cannot help but think of friends like Vilmarie and Jose Manuel who have left their home in Miami and have taken refuge in a safer city. So many this day are separated from their communities of faith as they wait to discover what the power of this hurricane will do to their homes, churches, cities, and towns.

Only a few states away, I have other friends whose congregations in Houston are gathering for the second Sunday after the devastation left by Hurricane Harvey. These churches spent this past week working across the city and helping those in the deepest need, and today they pause to find comfort, encouragement, and a word of hope amid the destroyed landscape around them.

On this day, I also think about the hundreds of thousands of Dreamers whose futures are now unknown with the phasing out of the DACA program.

I think about the people in Asia who have lost loved ones or had their lives devastated by flooding from monsoons and the Rohingya people in Myanmar who have been forced out of their homes and communities by the thousands. I think about those who are suffering from fires in the Pacific Northwest and those who have lost family members to the earthquake in Mexico.

All around us we see how climate change has affected our land and our communities. Politics and cruel medical diagnoses increase our stress, too. One colleague and I shared this week how we have had trouble sleeping because of all the pain in our world, our church, and our community. "Choose your stressor," we half-heartedly joked, realizing that we have many tragedies that might keep us up at night.

We have stressors, no doubt, but in the midst of this, we also see around us so many examples of love and self-sacrifice as people around the nation reach out to help one another in need. People are making generous financial gifts to helping organizations who have been in the trenches in Texas, and now will be in the Caribbean islands, Florida, and other states. People are giving their time and

energy to clean out schools, hospitals, churches, and food pantries and frequently put their own needs on the back burner in order to do so.

Often, in a common tragedy, like a natural disaster, the differences that would normally occupy our time seem to fade into the distance. When you are frantically moving bags of cement into place, you don't stop to ask the one heaving bags next to you where he stands on the latest political action. When you are using your boat to rescue neighbors from the roof of their house as the water rises, you don't care anymore that they voted differently in the last election, or that they had a sign in their yard that you loathed to drive by each day. When you are unloading crates of water for a family sleeping on cardboard and using towels for a blanket, you don't ask them what their religion is or where they stand on immigration. It is amazing, isn't it, that when we are focused on survival, the things that divide us often fade into the background.

I am reminded of the 1958 Sidney Poitier movie *The Defiant Ones* about two convicts who escape from the chain gang when a truck crashes through a roadside barrier and plows into the prisoners, creating havoc. Two men, played by Poitier and Tony Curtis, manage to escape during the chaos after the crash. They are shackled to one another, because "the warden had a sense of humor,"

even though they were sworn enemies. In their escape, they inevitably must work together to get away from the pack of bloodhounds chasing them down. As they run away, they fall into a deep ditch with slippery sides. One convict nearly pulls himself all the way to the top, but slides back down, unable to escape without the help of his partner. Working together, they climb up and out of the ditch and begin their quest for freedom again. Recognizing their need for one another, they begin to put aside their hatred and work together so that both might survive.

In this story, the two convicts lived out what Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, “Unless we learn to live together as brothers [and sisters], we will die together as fools.”¹

In some ways, Hurricanes Harvey and Irma have become for us a metaphor for what is happening in our nation as the destructive, harsh winds of unrest and division lash out at every institution we hold dear. The winds of hatred against those who are different have blown through our communities and our families and have left pain, anger, fear, and brokenness in their path. The maelstrom of discrimination against transgender persons in the military, the torrential downpour of hatred against people of color from white supremacists, the violent

¹ Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 8.

storm of actions against immigrants and refugees seeking asylum and a life of hope – all of these metaphorical storms of unrest have wreaked havoc on our nation. Like so many people on the Caribbean islands, those who are affected by these metaphorical storms are often left without light or power, in darkness and confusion, wondering how they will survive.

In the 12th and 13th chapters of Romans, Paul writes to the early church, teaching them how to live together. In chapter 12, Paul instructs the people to let their love be genuine, to live in harmony with one another, to be humble, and even to show compassion and kindness to their enemies, feeding them when they are hungry and giving them something to drink when they are thirsty. His ultimate message is one of love. In today's passage, Paul again turns to love, letting his people know that love is the only thing we owe one another. When we love our neighbor as ourselves, we fulfill the law, for we cannot love our neighbor and do wrong to them. As we love one another, we live in the light. We put aside the works of darkness and wear the armor of light (to add an additional metaphor). As we wear this armor of light we have, in essence, "put on Christ" and therefore bear the light of Christ to the world in our own actions of love.

It is important to remember that the love about which Paul speaks is not a sentimental, Hollywood love; rather, it is love shown through our lives and in our actions. New Testament scholar Paul Achtemeier writes:

To love someone is actively to promote that person's good. To be commanded to love one's enemy means that one is commanded to work for that person's good, not harm. To love an enemy therefore does not mean primarily to change one's emotional state toward that person so much as it means to do good for that enemy, regardless of what one's emotional response to that person may happen to be. Love acts for the good of another. . . . [T]hat is the love that fulfills the law. . . . [S]uch love means to cease actions that harm another person and to do what promotes that person's good.²

Such love began in Lincoln, Nebraska on a Sunday morning in June of 1991.

On that day. . .

. . . Cantor Michael Weisser and his wife, Julie, were unpacking boxes in their new home when the phone rang. "You will be sorry you ever moved into 5810 Randolph Street, Jew boy," the voice said, and hung up.

² Paul Achtemeier, *Romans*, Interpretation Series, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1985), 209.

Two days later, the Weissers received a manila packet in the mail. “The KKK is watching you, Scum,” read the note. Inside were pictures of Adolf Hitler, caricatures of Jews with hooked noses, blacks with gorilla heads, and graphic depictions of dead blacks and Jews. “The Holofoax was nothing compared to what’s going to happen to you,” read one note.

When the Weissers called the police, they learned the name of their oppressor – Larry Trapp, the state leader of the Ku Klux Klan. He led a group of skinheads and klansmen who repeatedly terrorized Jews, blacks and Asians in their state and beyond. Several acts of violence and destruction had been attributed to Trapp, even though he was confined to a wheelchair as a result of diabetes. They had heard he planned to bomb the Weisser’s synagogue.

When Trapp started a white-supremacist television show on a local channel, Weisser reacted with anger, calling Trapp’s hotline and leaving a message reminding Trapp that before Hitler killed the Jews, he rounded up those with physical handicaps. He kept calling and leaving messages until finally Trapp picked up and furiously demanded who he was.

“You black?” Trapp demanded. “Jewish,” Weisser replied. “Stop harassing me,” said Trapp, who demanded to know why he was calling.

Weisser remembered a suggestion of his wife's. "Well, I was thinking you might need a hand with something, and I wondered if I could help," Weisser ventured. "I know you're in a wheelchair and I thought maybe I could take you to the grocery store or something."

Trapp was too stunned to speak. Then he cleared his throat. "That's okay," he said. "That's nice of you, but I've got that covered. Thanks, anyway. But don't call this number anymore."

"I'll be in touch," Weisser replied.

And he was. They continued to talk and Weisser confronted Trapp about the hateful rhetoric he used against blacks and Jews on his TV show. Trapp apologized, but then did it again. The cantor led his congregation in prayer for this white supremacist leader.

Then one evening the phone rang at the Weisser's house. Trapp was on the other line.

"I want to get out," Trapp said, "but I don't know how." The Weissers offered to go over to Trapp's that night to "break bread."

Trapp hesitated at first but then told them where he lived. When they entered his apartment, he burst into tears. He pulled the swastika rings off his fingers and before long they were all laughing, crying, and hugging. It was a sight no one ever could have predicted, and few would have believed.

Trapp resigned from all his racist organizations and wrote apologies to the many people he had threatened or abused. When, a few months later, Trapp learned that he had less than a year to live, the Weissers invited him to move into their two bedroom/three children home. When his condition deteriorated, Julie quit her job as a nurse to care for him, sometimes all night. Six months later he converted to Judaism; three months after that he died.

Most people [writes Walter Wink] who are violent have themselves been the victims of violence. It should come as no surprise, then, to learn that Larry Trapp had been brutalized by his father and was an alcoholic by the fourth grade.³

“Unless we learn to live together as family, we will die together as fools.”

³ Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium*, (New York: Doubleday, 1993).

Unless we learn to love with reckless abandon, we will lose ourselves to the darkness.

Friends, in the real and metaphorical storms of life, let love be your law. Let light be your armor. Let God be your guide.

In the name of the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.

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