

## THE BREATH WE BREATHE

Romans 13:8-14

A Communion Meditation Preached by Robert E. Dunham

September 8, 2019

Recently I came across Billy Collins' poem, "See No Evil." You know... the three monkeys, with paws strategically placed to see no evil, hear no evil, or speak no evil. Collins wrote,

No one expected all three of them  
to sit there on their tree stumps forever,  
their senses covered with their sinuous paws  
so as to shut out the vile, nefarious world.

As it happened,  
it was the one on the left  
who was the first to desert his post,  
uncupping his ears,  
then loping off into the orbit of rumors and lies,  
but also into the realm of symphonies,  
the sound of water tumbling over rocks  
and wind stirring the leafy domes of trees.

Then the monkey on the right lowered his hands  
from his wide mouth and slipped away  
in search of someone to talk to,  
some news he could spread,  
maybe something to curse or shout about.

And that left the monkey in the middle  
alone with his silent vigil,  
shielding his eyes from depravity's spectacle,  
blind to the man whipping his horse,  
the woman shaking her baby in the air,  
but also unable to see  
the russet sun on a rough shelf of rock  
and apples in the grass at the base of a tree.

Sometimes, he wonders about the other two,  
listens for the faint sounds of their breathing  
up there on the mantle  
alongside the clock and the candlesticks.

And some nights in the quiet house  
he wishes he could break the silence with a question,

but he knows the one on his right  
would not be able to hear,  
and the one to his left,  
according to their sacred oath –  
the one they all took with one paw raised –  
is forbidden forever to speak, even in reply.<sup>1</sup>

“No one expected all three of them to sit there forever,” Collins wrote, to which my pastor-friend Carla Pratt Keyes quipped,

No one, except, I guess, that middle monkey... resolved as he was, or *resigned* as he was, to the oath they'd taken long before. [I wonder] what prompted them to take it. Did the monkeys raise their paws in *disgust* at the scandals they'd witnessed – things too unpleasant to see? Did they cover their senses in *fear* that some evil might cause them to stumble...? Perhaps they acted in *despair* at the problem of evil all around them ... the futility of engaging a world so riddled with wrong. I can see why the oath they took might have seemed like a good idea.<sup>2</sup>

Well, given the news in recent months, I suspect we can all see. What a summer it has been! Let me offer some names of people and places without comment, and let your minds fill in the details: Robert Mueller...the Squad... Greenville, North Carolina... Baltimore... the Gilroy Garlic Festival... El Paso... Dayton... Morton, Mississippi... Midland and Odessa. We have witnessed the unconcealed bigotry. The shameless lies. The vitriol in Washington and at campaign rallies. And, as always, the shootings. Western civilization has taken some direct hits in the ol' USA this summer.

Tragedies and turmoil sometimes bring out the best in people... but they can bring out the worst, too. And we have seen both in unadorned fashion this summer. We have seen those who put their own lives and safety at risk in order to help others in their misery and grief. And we have seen those who disdained any notion of a common good and sought only their own crude personal advantage.

As the summer wore on, and I began to sit with the text from Romans Mark read for us this morning, I found Paul's words taking on a greater urgency than before.

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments ... are summed up in this word, 'Love

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<sup>1</sup> Billy Collins, “See No Evil,” *The Trouble with Poetry and Other Poems*, New York: Random House, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Carla Pratt Keyes, in a sermon preached October 7, 2007, at the Ginter Park Presbyterian Church, Richmond, Virginia.

your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. (13:8-10)

In the 1930s, during the emergence of Hitler’s Third Reich, the Swiss theologian Karl Barth wrote about that text and argued that “even in the world of shadows love must come into prominence... [and be] undertaken as [a] protest against the course of this world.”<sup>3</sup> Barth was not talking about a Hallmark-card kind of sentimental love, or weak-kneed emotion or affection, but love as a force for good, as the very power of God’s grace, as the source of full and true humanity. Love breaks down walls. Love forgives widely and even recklessly. Love binds up the broken and the broken-hearted. Love reaches across lines of division and separation. By such love, we bless – and *do not harm* – our neighbors in this world. Indeed, said Barth, “Love is the breath we breathe, when, in the realm of evil, we have no breath left.”<sup>4</sup>

This summer has left many of us breathless. But we also saw the strength of love in hands reaching out to help... hands from across this country and from around our world. We saw it in the gracious hospitality afforded to strangers and refugees (which is, after all, the heart of Christian hospitality). We saw people raising their voices in protest of the family separations at our southern border. We saw a Presbyterian camp and conference center – Mo-Ranch Assembly in Texas – go to the border to provide camp experiences for migrant and refugee children. We heard church leaders call out “hate speech” and press the Gospel claim in behalf of “the sacredness of every single human being,” urging Christians to “stand witness against the bigotry, hatred, intolerance, and xenophobia ... hurled at us.” What we witnessed was not sentimentality, but love-in-action, and those paying attention were inspired by (that is, *breathed in*) such a spirit of grace and hospitality, courage and love.

“Love is the breath we breathe when, in the realm of evil, we have no breath left.”

Breathless we are. But we’ve seen the strength of love in the generosity of people, the kindness of people – young and old, of all economic backgrounds, again from across our country – pushing back against the hateful and the unconscionable silence that has accompanied it. We have seen people’s hearts and courage on display.

“Love is the breath we breathe when, in the realm of evil, we have no breath left.”

When in the realm of evil... Barth said. What evil have we seen? Well, some of it has been clearly visible... the lies, the rage, the greed, the anger, the bigotry. It has not been a pretty sight. Beyond such obvious evil that we saw in television newscasts all summer, there is another evil we may have to look more carefully to see. We will see it not so much on our televisions, but in our mirrors. The aftermath of this summer is begging us to take a long, critical look at ourselves as a people... at our cities and our society. I have spent this summer fighting off fear that death has visited more than the

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<sup>3</sup> Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, London, Oxford University Press, 1933, 1972, 492.

<sup>4</sup> Barth, 496. I am grateful to my friend and colleague Chandler Stokes and his paper on this text at the January 2005 meeting of the Moveable Feast in Austin, Texas, for pointing me to Barth’s comments.

sites of mass shootings ... that perhaps our *country* is dying as well. It is dying not so much from threats from without (though our *democratic processes* are in peril because of such efforts); it is dying also of a form of heart disease. Oh, we have plenty of sympathy and compassion for individuals in crisis... our hearts are healthy in that way... but we have shrugged our shoulders as policy makers have ignored large segments of our nation's people while magnifying up the advantages enjoyed by others. Our economy has been booming, except for all those places where it has not. Our neighborhoods are thriving, except for those who are being quietly forced out. Our lack of a coherent immigration policy has become an excuse for closing borders to legitimate asylum seekers. Some are reaping great rewards from private detention centers and prisons, but at what cost to our basic humanity and decency? A nation cannot long sustain such failures of heart.

One spring day in the church I served in North Carolina, an adult class was discussing Tim Tyson's book *Blood Done Sign My Name*, the story of the murder in 1970 of a young African American teenager by a white shopkeeper in a town not far from ours. We'd spent a good bit of time on the details of the story, when someone changed the focus. She asked, "If we were blind to so many of the injustices that led to the struggle for civil rights in this country, what injustices are we not addressing today?" The consensus response was swift, and not new. It was as old as the Biblical prophets and as fresh as this summer in America; person after person named the injustice of *poverty* and *discrimination* in a nation of unprecedented abundance. To people of faith, such injustice is evil. It is insidious. And if we are not careful and thoughtful, it will be the death of us as a society.

There is, of course, an answer to this evil. It is also an answer as old as the words of the prophets and the teachings of Jesus. It is an answer that is strong, not weak... an answer that is brave, not cowardly. And its name is love. Love that embraces all humanity. Love for the stranger. Love that stirs in us hearts for compassion and consciences for justice. Love that stands firm in the face of evil and seeks to turn its tide.

As he looked at the rise of Hitler's madness, Karl Barth said, "even in the world of shadows love must come into prominence... [and be] undertaken as [a] protest against the course of this world." Such love is, says Paul, the sum of all the commandments; it is our answer to lawlessness; it is the remedy for the heart disease that afflicts our nation; and it is the command of Jesus, sealed for us in the new covenant we will celebrate presently around this table. We have no higher calling in our time than the bold embodiment of such love.

So, take Christ's love with you into the world this day. Take it in whatever ways you can into the streets of New York and into the halls of power. It is the most important word we have to share, the most important gift we have to offer, the most important witness we have to bear. Love is, in fact, "the [very] breath we breathe when, in the realm of evil, we have no breath left."