

“What now?”

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Often, when a preacher sits down to prepare a sermon, there are infinite questions to answer—both those posed by the text for the week and those posed by the week’s headlines. Questions about God and faith, and the way of things in the world. The preacher reads the passages, reads the week’s news, listens to commentators of scripture and of society, and prays. By the end of the week, by the end of the sermon, there is always one last question. What now? What do we do now? Where do we go from here?

Most effective sermons propose an answer to this final, lingering question. What now? Now we pray. Now we work. Now we weep. The most memorable sermons carry us out the door with a compelling answer to that week’s “What now?” or at least a deeper way to frame the question. We go out into the world with a task or a challenge on our hearts, some conviction placed there by the power of the Spirit. While we preachers hope that our words might have a little something to do with it, the truth is that this conviction often comes in spite of us, born of something much purer than our egos and more encompassing than our educations.

We are in a season that is heavy with “what now.” People are losing work, losing income. Our healthcare systems continue to be overworked and overwhelmed. The west is burning, the south is drowning, the Midwest is somehow suffering the effects of a terrible drought and an impossible storm at the same time. Our elders fear leaving their homes and our young people are isolated and exhausted. College campuses and school buildings are not the places of joyous reunions and crowded tables that they are meant to be. Our brothers and sisters are dying, and

tensions between civilians and law enforcement continue to rise. We begin and end every day swallowed up in the big question “What now?”

One of the purposes of this pulpit is to be a platform from which to answer, as best our limited human minds and hearts can, the what nows. Great preachers and pastors have stood in pulpits and on street corners and offered up the word of God in moments of joy and moments of sorrow, to congregations of believers and to crowds of challengers. When our hearts are broken, when our world turns upside down and our souls feel impossibly heavy, when we feel helpless, it is utterly human to want to DO something. In the face of turmoil, human beings are compelled to action. For some, that action is silence and weeping, and for others that action is showing up in painful places and raising their voices. Our gifts and our callings differ, but the drive to respond is what makes us human.

But what is the Christian response? What is the uniquely Christ-like answer when the world is shouting, “What now?” Christ himself poses the challenge- Take up your cross, and follow me. We do not have heavy wooden crossbeams across our backs, and we are thousands of miles away from the place where our Lord gave his life. So what does it look like to lose our lives in order to find them, to take up our crosses and follow the God of Love?

For that answer we turn to Paul, a preacher and one of the most influential pastors in our history. Paul offers us, in clear and certain terms, what it means to be a Christian in the middle of “what now?”

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰ love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹ Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit,

serve the Lord.^[E] ¹² Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. ¹³ Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly;^[E] do not claim to be wiser than you are. ¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸ If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God;^[E] for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” ²⁰ No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

When the world feels like it is ending, when every phone call and news bulletin is met with a quiet what now, Paul preaches to us from across millennia, from a pulpit much sturdier and more permanent than this one. Love genuinely. Rejoice in hope. Be patient in suffering. Persevere in prayer, serve the Lord. From the quiet patience to the steady affection to the zealous refusal to repay evil for evil, every moment of the Christian life at its best can be found here. The Christians we hope to raise our children to be, and the people we hope we have been when we reach our final days, the leaders we seek and the teachers we adore, can be seen reflected in these verses. It isn't because Paul was uniquely gifted in preaching that this letter is so effective, although by all accounts he was. It is because every word, and every action each word describes, points back to the God who taught us how to live by dying.

We know what it is to bless those who curse us because our Lord prayed for those who beat and mocked him as he died. We know what it is to weep with those who weep because our savior wept bitterly at the grief of his friends, even as he knew the grief would be turned to glory. We know what it is to feed our enemies and to quench their thirst, because Judas was invited to the table in the upper room and shared the bread and drank the wine that would come to be for us the very presence of God. We know what it is to leave room for God's justice because even as they attempted to defend his life, Jesus told his friends to lay down their swords.

We will always ask "what now?" because to fear and to doubt and to question is to be human. We will always need to wrestle and wonder and reach for understanding. Responses to this question will be shaped differently over time and in different spaces, but the answer remains the same. Take up your cross. Let love be genuine. Jesus has already shown you how.