

"Nearer To Us Now?" A sermon based on Ezekiel 33:7-11; Romans 13:8-14 and Matthew 18:15-20 delivered on September 6, 2026 at the First Congregational UCC of Onekama, MI by the Rev. Alison Dutton Jacobs.

Paul was an optimist or, I suppose a pessimist, depending on how you look at a prophecy that anticipates the coming of the "end times" to be imminent; to be coming soon. In the 50's—and here I am talking about 50 CE (aka AD)--not the Elvis Presley 50's—Christians believed that Christ was coming back to save them very soon. “Soon and Very Soon” as the wonderfully memorable lyrics of the modern spiritual by Andrae Crouch says. And, as it is so clear in the Gospel of Mark’s theology from about the same time. In point of fact, the word "immediately" appears some twenty-seven times in what is the earliest and the shortest of the Gospel accounts.

For Paul, this most literally meant that "the night is gone and the day is near" that there was no time to mess around with sinning—that we should not make any provisions for the flesh, “to gratify it’s desires” — that they needed, in short, to "love our neighbors" as ourselves and to prepare ourselves for the light of justice that would be coming SOON in Christ. With an emphasis on the SOON.

Thus, in theological terms, both Paul and the author of the Gospel of Mark, were functioning under eschatological urgency—they felt that the end times—"the eschaton" in Greek, were very near--and that we better clean up our act in preparation. This confidence--this urgency—was what allowed Paul to be able to say in our Romans' passage this morning, "for salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers" and literally MEAN it.

But is it really true for us today? Using Paul’s own definition of what the signs of that are: believing, loving neighbor, laying aside works of darkness, living honorably, putting aside jealousy and quarreling can we really say that "salvation is nearer for us now. . ." than it was in Paul’s day? The real question is, then, have we as a community of faith; as the Christian church; as human society in general; progressed in our quest to live honorably, in loving neighbor as ourselves, since Paul’s day? Or have we learned

to settle discord and conflict with grace, as our Matthew passage this morning also demands of us? Matthews' Gospel was also written in the first century sometime between the years 75-90. Have we in some one thousand nine hundred and seventy-six years — or so—made significant strides towards the equality and mutual human living that our Savior modeled for us?

When we look at the world around us in 2026, it is hard to support that we have progressed in any significant way. It is hard to say that “salvation” as Paul describes its characteristics in his letter to Rome that “salvation is nearer to us now”! In this sermon I will not go into all the ways that our country and our global community are failing, or all the backward steps that have been happening with issues of justice, human dignity and equality, and the care of Mother Earth. All of these are obvious.

As a woman, the backward movement in personal and civil rights for woman and racial and gender equality is most grievous. It is painful to realize that we seem to have slid backwards from even Paul's day when many of the churches were based in women's homes. Woman “patrons,” as they were called played a significant role in the founding of what we know as the Christian church. In Romans (16:1), in fact, Paul commends Phoebe of Cenchrese, a port city of Corinth, as she is the patron of that church. As regards racial and class equality, a famous paving stone in Corinth stands as a permanent reminder that, a freed slave Erastus was able to hold one of the highest civic offices in the city, a city in which we know one of Paul's most significant mission churches thrived.

Paul's emphasis in his letters was to admonish, teach, correct and sometimes even praise the churches that he had founded so that they lived as Christlike a life as possible. He is even heard to strongly remind the church in Philippi (Philippians 2:12) to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” in his absence from them. The Lord cautions Ezekiel in our Hebrew scripture this morning to do a similar thing as Paul does for his churches when God says, if “you do not speak out to dissuade

[sinners] from their ways, that wicked person will die for their sin, and I will hold you accountable.” (Ezekiel 33:8)

Our Matthew passage, written 25 to 40 years after Paul’s letter to the Romans, is to remind his churches and the one’s created around the legacy of a particular apostle, how to behave properly and to be accountable to each other. His description of what to do with conflict and disagreements in the church are often used today to create covenants of conduct to follow; and the passage speaks of how to go about “putting aside jealousy and quarreling” in those communities. One of my seminary professors at Andover-Newton, Mary Luti, now happily retired, wrote recently in a UCC Daily Devotion column the following reflection on this very passage in Matthew:

September 4, 2026

### **After Matthew**

Mary Luti

*Jesus said, “If a sibling sins against you, point out the fault when you two are alone. If they listen, you’ve regained them. But if they don’t, take one or two others with you. If they still won’t listen, tell the whole church. If they won’t listen to the church, treat them like a gentile and a tax collector.” - Matthew 18:15-17 (adapted)*

My Bible notes say that in this passage, Matthew is laying out a process for “church discipline.” That feels judgy, way too much like keeping people in line. It’s not something I associate with progressive congregations.

Which isn’t to say that mutual accountability in church isn’t important. It is. But it’s

also tricky, and when we're clumsy or careless about it, or use it as a little power trip, we often end up doing more hurtful, condemning harm than good. No wonder the idea of "disciplining" each other makes us cringe.

But notice this: Matthew places this instruction right after the parable of the lost sheep and the searching shepherd. The immediate context of discipline turns out to be a vast mercy. In that light, discipline feels more tender and less judgy, like bringing someone home, not setting someone right.

Even that final instruction to treat a resistant sibling like a tax collector lands differently. It's Matthew who's writing this Gospel, after all. Our forebears believed he was the same Matthew Jesus called from his tax collector's booth to follow him. After Matthew, no one is beyond the reach of grace.

The practice of discipline doesn't condemn the wayward. It acknowledges a need to start over. It doesn't despair of anyone. It assumes a graced capacity for responding and repair. It doesn't run out of chances. It assumes that when you're finally ready, Mercy will be, too.

While Christ's coming in the end times may not be "nearer to us now," the Grace and Mercy of Christ through the Holy Spirit "never runs out of chances," as Mary Luti reminds us. And, here on this earthly plain that is pretty darn Good News indeed! Amen.