School has begun. Each year it seemed that my first class writing assignment was to answer the perennial question, "What did you do on your summer vacation?" How many of you wrote such a paper?

No matter what you did or where you went this past summer, it was almost impossible to escape the heaviness of this past summer’s headlines. Thousands of children traveled alone from Central American countries to enter the U.S. as refugees. Ebola deaths spread to more West African nations killing hundreds. The forces of ISIS took over major Iraqi cities and beheaded two U.S. journalists in Syria. Russia usurped Crimea and threatened the rest of Ukraine. Gaza has been reduced to rubble while Hamas rockets still fly toward Israeli cities. Michael Brown, an eighteen-year-old youth who might have started college this week, was shot and killed by a police officer in the waning days of August.

After such a summer, how can we do anything but scoff at Paul's words from Romans? "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law." Really, Paul? "Owe no one anything except to love one another."

Several years ago, theologian Krister Stendahl told a group of pastors, "Never preach about love unless it's in the text." I guess he had heard too many sermons that claimed love as the answer to everything that's wrong with the world.

Of course, the word love is in this Romans text - five times in just three verses. Paul says that all laws can be summed up in one simple sentence: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Paul knew what we know: loving our neighbors is not simple.

Was Paul totally out of touch with reality? Given the summer headlines should we set aside Paul's words as totally naïve and unrealistic? Or, are we too quick to name his idea as naïve?
Perhaps our traumatized world needs a lot more people who dare to love one another across differences in spite of the risks. Paul invites us try a little holy foolishness, even if people laugh at us. Such foolishness may be the only thing that can change the world.

More importantly, such foolishness is the only thing that can change us. There will always be news stories that disturb us, challenge us, provoke us, alarm us, or unsettle us. So what do we do to claim who we are, and how we want to live?

Fundamental to Paul was his unshakeable belief that in Christ, everything was different in how God related to the world, and so everything must be different in how the world now must relate to God.

Paul's passion lasted his whole life, because he knew that the good news of God’s grace in every person’s life was too good to keep quiet about it.

Paul's mission was to people who were trying their hardest to figure out how to live in the Roman world as followers of Jesus Christ. With our troubled world the task has not become any easier.

Yet here we are, still looking for that good news, still living in a world groaning for God, yearning for healing, and seeking grace. Here we are, wanting to believe that the grace of God is still as possible as it ever was and ever will be. That's faith, my friends.

A large part of Paul's message to the church in Rome, and to most of the churches to whom he wrote, was to encourage the people in how to live, how to behave, and in what to do in response to God's gracious gift to them, to the world.

It seemed clear to him that if we live our lives knowing that the relationship we have with God is of vital importance, then our behavior ought to reflect that this is what we believe.

It wasn't about doing something right in order to win God's approval. It was about faith, faith in God's actions, faith in God's love, and faith in God's promise of steadfast relationship with us!

Faith, however, is not just about believing. Faith is also about doing, acting, and working in God's kingdom here and now, doing the work of Christ in the place where we are, responding to that free gift of God's love that we can do nothing to earn, but that we can do everything to show off.

I'll tell you the truth, I love unwrapping gifts! And I can’t wait to show the gift off. The most beautiful gift that we have been given is God's great love - how can we show it off?
   By sharing the glorious gift of God’s grace with everyone
   By acting out our faith as graciously as divinely possible, and
   By living out our hope in every word and deed, showing our love for our neighbor.
   By taking every possible moment to share, to act and live out our faith in a world that so desperately needs the grace of God.
There is a chaffinch bird, a little reddish-brown bird that is found in Europe. The chaffinch sings like a canary, but there is something unique about this popular songbird. When people take them into their homes, the little birds soon forget how to sing.

When they forget how to sing, they get sick. Eventually, they become depressed and die. Unless, of course, they are taken back to be with other chaffinch, in which case they congregate and relearn how to sing and are well again.

Sadly, we live in a society that is characterized by polarization. We keep telling ourselves there is no middle ground; that we are right and they are wrong, whoever we and they are. It is certainly true that as Christians we need to dare to be different than those who subscribe to selfish and self-defeating behaviors.

But if we are not careful, we may forget how to sing our song of faith, a song of mercy and humility. A song that resounds with a chorus not of, "Anything you can do, I can do better; I can do anything better than you!" but "Both in our living and in our dying, we belong to God, we belong to God."

We need to see each others' strengths, accept one another's differences, and celebrate our unity in Jesus Christ. Because the need is urgent and because our time - yours and mine - is short, we must "put on the Lord Jesus Christ." We must dare to be different. Amen

Every day is a new adventure in God's good news. This is our writing assignment for this year, written with the ink of God’s grace: “How I’m going to spend this coming year being God’s grace at all times.”

This morning as we come to the Lord's Table, let us receive the love God offers through Christ. We come to this all-we-can-eat buffet of God's Grace and not only feast upon the grace, mercy and forgiveness God offers but leave the rags of the world behind and clothe ourselves in Christ. Once again, we remind ourselves to put on the Lord Jesus Christ each day of our lives.

On Your Mark! Get Set! Go!