

Wesley United Methodist Church

Rev. Beverly E Stenmark

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Come to the Table

Text: Romans 13:8-14

Matthew 18:15-20

Title: The Table of Love

Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu was born in Macedonia on August 26, 1910. At the age of twelve, she felt strongly the call of God. She knew she had to be a missionary to spread the love of Christ. At the age of 18, she left her parental home and joined the Sisters of Loreto, an Irish community of nuns with missions in India. After a few months' training in Dublin, she was sent to India, where on May 24, 1931, she took her initial vows as a nun. For about 17 years she taught at a wealthy girls school run by the convent but the suffering and poverty that she glimpsed outside the convent walls made a deep impression on her.

In 1948, at the age of 36, she received permission to leave the order and began to work outside in the slums. Two years later she received permission from the Pope to start her own order, "The Missionaries of Charity", whose primary task was to love and care for those persons nobody was prepared to look after.ⁱ Mother Teresa, as most people know her, never looked back. She devoted her life to caring for those who were most in need. She received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979, and died in 1997 at the age of 87..

Her work and her life were all about love – about spreading God's love. Most of us will never do the work that Mother Teresa did, but we can love in the same way that she did. She said that we should "Spread love wherever you go. Let no one ever come to you without leaving happier." That is something that is within the scope of our lives. We should never underestimate how much difference it can make in someone's life if we

simply listen to them; if we create a safe place for them to share their cares and concerns. We should never underestimate how much difference it can make in someone's life if we simply treat another person as a child of God, someone loved by God, someone who has worth simply because he or she is.

This doesn't take any special training – or at least not the kind that you learn in school. It is the kind of love that Jesus and Paul talked about, and especially today in the passage of Paul's letter to the Romans. It is something that is at the very core of our identity as Christians – the opportunity, the responsibility, the obligation to love.

In this section of the letter to the Romans, Paul is writing about the law and about following the law, but he emphasizes that there is a whole lot more to following Christ than just following the rules – or the law. We know that laws can become very complicated. One law leads to another and another as the lawmaker tries to cover every situation. Jesus was asked by an expert in the Law what the greatest commandment was. In Matthew's gospel, we hear his reply, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”ⁱⁱ (Deuteronomy 6:5, Leviticus 19:18)

These were not original to Jesus – they were part of the rules, the law, the commandments that Jews tried to follow. They can be found in the book of Deuteronomy (6:5) and in Leviticus (19:18). But Jesus made an important point, that all the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments. Paul, likewise, in the section from Romans, says that the

law can really be “summed up in this word, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Paul reminds us that we should “owe no one anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.” The law is meant to serve God and neighbor, not the other way around. In Judaism, in Christianity, and I believe in life, the law must bow down to the demands of love and should carry love’s desire for justice.

Let’s think for a minute about this love. When Jesus and Paul talk about love, they are not talking about that wonderful heart fluttering feeling that we may have when we describe ourselves as falling in love. They are not talking about that warm feeling in our hearts when we look at those most dear to us. That certainly is love, but in the English language love is used to describe so many things – everything from loving chocolate to loving our children and everything in between and beyond.

Loving others, as Jesus and Paul described it, is not something that we grit our teeth and push ourselves to accomplish. It is not even primarily a feeling. Rather love is something that we receive from God and that we pass on to others. Love is a gift of God’s grace – something that we receive daily. As recipients of this great love, our response is to share that love with others, to live in that love. Love is a verb – it is an action, something we do, even if it is not something we feel.

Mother Teresa said, “Let us always meet each other with smile, for the smile is the beginning of love” and “Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love.”

I recently had a conversation with a child about how we sometimes act or pretend to feel differently than we really do. We talked about having a really tough day, and feeling frustrated or tired but then someone who

doesn't know what kind of day we have been having comes along and greets us, or asks something simple of us. The child told me about watching her mother at that point, put a smile on her face and greet the other person.

That is a simple act of love – treating the other person as someone of value, not as a recipient of our frustration or tiredness, not as someone in the wrong place at the wrong time. That may not be a great thing, but it is a little thing and it makes a difference. I'm guessing that it may also have made a difference in the Mom's life because for at least a minute it shifted her mindset from how tired and frustrated she was to being pleasant to another person.

I imagine that we have all been that person who was just in the wrong place at the wrong time, and quite likely, we have done that to others as well. The good news for us, is that when we recognize that our actions have not been loving, we can have the comfort of knowing that God still loves us and that each day we have the opportunity again to love as God loves us.

This love involves everything we do both as individuals and as a faith community. This love is lived out one day at a time, each and every day. Every day we face challenges in how we live. Each day we are faced with the decision – conscious or otherwise – of how we treat another person. Each day builds upon the one before.

For example, if you have never served at a food pantry, you might find it really hard to do. You may go because there is a need. You may go because you know that each person who comes is a child of God – a neighbor. You are acting in love simply by going and being present. But you might not feel immediate love for the people you encounter and you

might find it hard to talk with those who have come to be fed. You might find yourself making judgments about who they are and how they live.

If you continue to serve at a food pantry, you will discover that you start to learn about the people who come. You will start to see them as people just like you, people with hopes and dreams, people with challenges. After a while, you might discover that you are starting to feel the emotion of love for the people who come. You notice if they don't show up and you wonder if they are okay. It becomes easier and easier, and soon you realize that your initial loving action is also becoming a feeling of love for the people who come.

You may find yourself becoming more involved in the lives of those you are serving. Your reaction and response builds upon the previous day or experience and you continue to grow in love and in your journey toward becoming the person that God has gifted you to be.

The food pantry is just one illustration of the many ways that we can face the challenge each day of loving our neighbor. It may involve the cashier at the local store, the person standing by the roadside with a sign asking for help, the client at a drug treatment center, the next door neighbor whose actions irritate you. Each day is part of the journey and the life of love. Each day has its own challenges.

The ethic of love compels us to look after the oppressed and the outcast. Mother Teresa said, "I am a little pencil in the hand of a writing God, who is sending a love letter to the world." Isn't that great! Think about it for a minute. It seems to me like a great way to remember that the love we show to others does not come from us. The actions of mercy and justice that we do come not from ourselves but from God. We are God's

instruments. We are like a little pencil in the hands of a writing God. Through our actions, God is sending a love letter to the world.

Jesus reminded his disciples that where two or three are gathered in his name, he is present with them – with us. Every time we encounter a person, it is like encountering Jesus in disguise. We can bring Jesus with us into that encounter, or we can encounter Jesus when we meet the other, but Jesus is always present.

Paul was particularly concerned about the need for us to live in love and to spread that love. Paul, and those of his day, believed that Christ would come again and would do so very soon. Most of the early Christians expected Jesus to return during their lifetime. The work of Christians is to share God's love so that the world is transformed and everyone knows the love of God.

Paul was rightly burdened by the immensity of this task. After he encountered the living Christ, he was transformed. He changed from one who persecuted the followers of Jesus to one who was passionate about telling others about Jesus and about spreading the good news of God's love. He established some of the early churches, continued to work with them, writing letters to them and visiting whenever he could. We worked with them, and with God, toward the transformation of the world to a place where everyone knows about the love of God and we practice and share that love with all.

He saw this as an urgent task. He expected Christ to return at any moment. It's been about 2,000 years since Paul was writing and working, but the task is no less urgent today. It is urgent today even with, or maybe because of, the passage of time. It is urgent because of the many failures and missed opportunities we have had to live into God's way of life. We

have a responsibility to be part of that mission today – a part that will be fulfilled only if we really begin to interact in love with our neighbors – both those inside and outside of the church; those close to us and those halfway around the world. This is not something that should be a big secret. We are to live so that everyone can see clearly who we are and how we love. We are to live so that others can see and experience the love of God through us.

Unlike Paul, most of us probably don't expect Christ to return in the immediate future, but the mission is still important for us today because we live in a world so full of darkness and brokenness. I think it is particularly important because we live in a culture where increasing numbers of people do not want anything to do with religion or with churches; where there is an increasing belief that Christians are hypocrites and that our behavior is no different than anyone else's. I think it is particularly important because so much of what gets attention about Christians is not about love but about self-interest or judgement. For me, this is the urgency that makes it even more important for us to live in ways that truly reflect God's love.

We may be the only Bible that someone ever reads. We may be the only example of God's love that someone ever sees. I think it is important for us to be aware of our behavior and our attitudes and ask ourselves if our behavior and attitude helps others to know about God's love or if it damages the Christian witness in the world.

There is a statue of Christ in a small village in France. Originally, the hands were outstretched in love. During the war, the statue was severely damaged by a bomb. Tradition says that the villagers tried to repair the statue but were unable to replace the hands. Someone decided to put a

sign there that may be part of a larger saying attributed to St. Theresa of Avila in the 1500's. The sign says, "Christ has no hands but yours."

We are the hands that reach out in love to a hurting world. We are the little pencil that God uses to write a love letter to the world.

ⁱ https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1979/teresa-bio.html

ⁱⁱ Matthew 22:37-40