

Wesley United Methodist Church  
September 6 2020  
Living With Christ - Love  
Scripture: Romans 13:8-14  
Matthew 18:15-20

As I pay my mortgage, taxes, cable, electric and gas bills, I wish that I could do as Paul says, "Owe no one anything, except to love one another." Paul is, or has, been talking about how to be a responsible citizen. Just before the words for today, he says that we should pay all our financial obligations. "Pay to all what is due them – taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due." And then the words from today's reading, "Owe no one anything, except to love one another."

In other words, even after we have met all of our other obligations, there is still one left and it is the most important one of all. "Love one another." Why is this important? Paul says that it is important because then you fulfill the law. Eugene Peterson in The Message puts it this way, "When you love others, you complete what the law has been after all along." And then he explains it further, "The law code – don't sleep with another person's spouse, don't take someone's life, don't take what isn't yours, don't always be wanting what you don't have, and any other 'don't' you can think of – finally adds up to this: Love other people as well as you do yourself. You can't go wrong when you love others. When you add up everything in the law code, the sum total is love."

The debt of love, unlike any other debt we owe, is one that we can never pay off. The obligation to love is still one that we owe every day.

Paul was writing at a time when they expected Jesus to return any day and so there was a sense of urgency to be sure that they were following the law, which as Paul points out, is summed up in one word, love. Almost 2,000 years later, most of us do not walk around anticipating that Jesus will return at any second, but that doesn't change the urgency with which we are called to love. We still have the responsibility to spread God's love through all the world. The best and only way for us to do that is to be agents of love wherever we are and with whomever we come in contact and also with those whom we will never meet, but who we are still admonished to love.

To the Jews and the early followers of Jesus following the law of God was really important. But following the law can get complicated. Think for just a second about a relatively short document of law – the United States Constitution. In its original form it was on 4 sheets of parchment. It has since been amended 27 times, including one amendment that repealed a previous one. These amendments have been enacted to meet the needs of a nation that has changed since the original signing of the constitution. We have a Supreme Court composed on nine jurists whose purpose is to function as the ultimate guardian and interpreter of the Constitution. Trying to interpret the Constitution today involves a large body of federal constitutional law studied and judged by many other courts as they try to determine if laws passed and judgements made violate the constitution or uphold it.

Laws have a way of multiplying as different situations arise and someone tries to figure out how to act upon the current question. But here, Paul steps away from the multiplication of laws and boils it down to one word: Love. Of course, he's not the first to do that. When Jesus was asked what the greatest law was, he said that the first was to love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength and the second was like it, to love your neighbor as yourself.

One of the big problems with law is that there are always those who are looking for a loophole, a way around it, and that's just one of the reasons why we have so many laws. But the other even bigger problem is that laws can only regulate behavior; they can't regulate, legislate, or change attitude. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus' answer, about the greatest law being to love God and love neighbor, is followed by the question of the loophole, "Who is my neighbor?" "Who do I have to love?" Or implied, "Who don't I need to love?" Laws can regulate behavior, but they cannot change attitude.

During the 1960's – not that long ago – a time still in the memory of many of us – During the Civil Rights movement, laws were passed about desegregating schools and about protecting the right of black people to vote among others. But while those laws attempted to regulate behavior, they couldn't do anything to change the attitude of white people toward black people. That takes something much more powerful than laws.

Essential to the Christian Faith is the very basic understanding of God's love. The most often quoted Bible Verse, is John 3:16. "For God so loved the world, that he

gave his only begotten son.” The Bible doesn’t say, “For God so loved white people.” It doesn’t say, “For God so loved Americans”. It doesn’t say, “For God so loved straight people, or educated people, or rich people, or Republicans or Democrats or any political party.” The Bible says, “For God so loved the world.” And that’s a big place including a whole lot of people.

When asked “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus’ response told in a story, required the questioner to acknowledge that the one who acted like a neighbor was the dreaded Samaritan, the one the questioner most likely wanted to leave out of the command to “love your neighbor in the same way that you love yourself.”

What does that look like for us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the United States, in the middle of a pandemic, in the middle of racial unrest, in the middle of a presidential campaign? What does it mean to love our neighbor? What does it mean to owe only the debt of love?

I think it means putting the needs of others ahead of our own wants. I think it means acting in a pandemic in ways that help to keep others safe. I think it means listening very carefully to others so that we can understand what they need in order to feel safe and then working to help that become a reality. I think it means voting in ways that look out for all of God’s children, not just for ourselves.

Mother Teresa, or now Saint Teresa of Calcutta lived her life actively loving and caring for those most poorly treated in the world. She understood her work and actions as a way of sharing God’s love with those who most needed to know about God’s love. She once said, “I’m a little pencil in the hand of a writing God, who is sending a love letter to the world.”

What would it look like in each of our lives if we thought of ourselves that way? How might our lives be different if we saw ourselves as a pencil in God’s hand, writing a love letter to the world? That’s what we are called to be and do. Love is, or should be, our identity as Christians. As our closing song will remind us, “They’ll Know we Are Christians by our love.” What would it look like if people really could identify us as Christians simply because we showed God’s love in ways that were easily recognizable?

In a few minutes, we will be celebrating the Sacrament of Holy Communion. This is a sacrament, or meal of love. It is about God's love for us. When we come to the table, we are coming to a table of love, a table where we are all included because Jesus often ate with the people who were normally excluded. He extended the table to include prostitutes, tax collectors, sinners. He extended the table to include us – to welcome us and all of God's children to the feast of love.

Philip Yancy in his book "Vanishing Grace" remembers a survey where people were asked the question, "What are the words you most long to hear?" It may not surprise you that the first answer was, "I love you." The second answer was "I forgive you." The surprising third answer was, "Supper's ready."<sup>i</sup> People long to belong, to be included, and eating with another is a profound way of accepting and including another. When we celebrate communion, we remember not only what Jesus did, but why he did it. We remember his great love for each of us. And we can hear Jesus say to us, "I love you. I forgive you. Supper's ready." And then we go forth to share that great love with others.

In Matthew's gospel we hear a plan for dealing with disagreements or hurts among believers. Matthew describes approaching our brother or sister in Christ. At each step of the process the intent, and the desire is to have reconciliation, to restore a broken relationship. When it appears that there is no way for the relationship to be restored, Jesus says to let the person be as a Gentile or a tax collector to you.

Some have taken this to mean that the person should be ostracized or excommunicated or somehow removed from the church. But if we think about how Jesus lived and how he treated people. He ate with Tax collectors. He reached out intentionally to include Gentiles and others who were considered unacceptable. He continued to reach out in love to all people – and so that is what we are still being called to do. "I love you. I forgive you. Supper's ready."

That passage in Matthew concludes with the reminder and the promise, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." As followers of Jesus, anytime we are with another person, we are gathered in his name, and he is with us, and that other is our neighbor – one whom we are called to love.

Let us pray:

God of love, sometimes it is so hard for us to love. We are grateful that you love each one of us, even when we do not think we are worthy of your love. You love us, simply because we are. We are your children and you love us. Help us to love others as you love us. Help us to love even those with whom we disagree, even those whom we do not like. Help us to love because you have loved us and because we know your love, we can also love. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Googling this took me to a couple of different sermons that said, “a recent survey”. I could not find any information about the survey. [https://www.heartlight.org/articles/201708/20170812\\_longtohear.html](https://www.heartlight.org/articles/201708/20170812_longtohear.html) identifies this as coming from Philip Yancey in his book “Vanishing Grace”, saying he remembers a survey where the people polled gave answers to the question, “What are the words you most long to hear?”