

September 6, 2020
Rev. Matthew Short

Reading: Romans 13:8-14

⁸ Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹ The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁰ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

¹¹ Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; ¹² the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; ¹³ let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴ Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Gospel: Matthew 18:15-20

¹⁵ “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. ¹⁶ But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸ Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

Sermon

The other day, I was in the store searching for a greeting card. And as I looked across all the sections...birthday, anniversary...there were still a few leftover graduation cards...I came to a small section labeled “Sweetest Day.” Maybe you have heard of this. I had always thought that it was a “Hallmark holiday,” created to sell more greeting cards. So, I had to look it up. Sweetest day this year, for any of you who were wondering, is on Saturday, October 17th. And it was actually started by a group of confectioners (candy makers) in Cleveland, Ohio. Originally, it was meant to be a day when boxes of candy were sent to newsboys, children who were orphaned, and those experiencing economic challenges. What it has developed into, of course, is a relatively little-known holiday with sappy cards and an excuse to buy candy, which is never bad I suppose. But, it got me thinking about love...and how it is presented in the culture as a feeling we have for each other. And you either have the feeling, or you don't. People fall in love, and people fall out of love. That's the over-simplified caricature of love.

Anyway, I got home from the store, and that was my chunk of time to begin to look at the scriptures for this sermon. So I looked at the scriptures for today and what is the first reading about? Love. Romans 13: “Owe no one anything except”(some translations say) “the continuing debt to love one another.”

Then, later that night, the news out of Kenosha came...another shooting, and all the pain that surrounds that. Since then, my mind has been swirling around love, and the difference between how we talk about it in the culture, and the love – the world-transforming love – that Paul is writing about in Romans, and that Jesus is demonstrating in today's Gospel reading. This is the love that our world so desperately needs right now.

So, that's what we are going to be talking about today: love. In the early church, in the modern church, and in the painful realities we see in our daily lives. Will you pray with me as we begin? God, we cry out to you. How long, O Lord, will we keep needing to be broken open to the world-transforming power of your love? Break us open again today. Help us to be still. Quiet our hearts and minds, and speak to us in the words we need to hear. In Jesus' name, Amen.

I actually want to start today with a powerful proposition for you. I believe that our identity as Christians...makes us counter-cultural rebels...*and* that this is what both of today's readings point us toward.

Now, maybe you don't feel like a counter-cultural rebel. But think for just a moment about how popular culture talks about love. What we see reflected in media; in movies and in Hallmark cards; is the idea that love is just an emotion. It's the warm-fuzzy feeling. Sometimes romantic, sometimes for friends or family, but mostly, it's a feeling...you either have, or you don't.

I always like to test that with people who have known each other a very, very long time. Think for a moment...if you have a friend or a spouse...someone you have known for a very long time...someone you would say, "yes, I love that person." Have you always, at every moment, felt warm-fuzzy emotions toward them?

Usually when I ask this, there are some folks in the room who have a few years on me...who just look at the person they came with and smile. They often laugh. Of course we don't always feel the warm-fuzzy emotions for those we say we love. Sometimes, they can downright get on our nerves.

No, those who have loved each other for a long time would say that love often has more to do with actions than it does with feelings. Our emotions change more frequently than the weather, so there has to be a deeper foundation for this thing we call "love."

This is one of those truths that we all know, deep down, but we just don't say outloud very often. Love...is a verb...not a noun. It's lived out best in actions, not feelings. In fact, the real truth about how we as human beings function is that it is pretty tough to think your way into new behaviors. This just doesn't tend to work very well for us. What really works is behaving your way into new thinking. Let me say that again, not only because you need to hear it, but because I need to hear it as well; what really works for us is not thinking our way into new behaviors, but behaving our way into new thinking.

So love...doesn't actually live in our heads. It lives in our mouths, in our words. It lives in our hands, in our actions. And of course, it is never perfect...never complete. Which means love...is

always an invitation to try again...because it is never *done*. We love imperfectly, so we try again. We love again. Love is *always* an invitation to try again.

We actually heard this just a bit ago in that reading from Romans...where Paul is making a *radical claim*. He says, "...owe no one anything, except" (some translations say) "the continuing debt to love one another, for the one who loves another *has fulfilled the law*."

There are two beautiful things happening here. First, the phrase "continuing debt." That phrase is not in some English translations of the Bible, but if you look at this verse in the original language of the New Testament (Greek), you can see why some English translations write it this way. I prefer that translation, actually. There is something about hearing that *ultimately*, we don't owe each other anything...except the continuing debt to love...which means we owe each other *everything*...because it is work that is never finished. I will say it again; in the Bible, love is always an invitation to try again.

The second beautiful thing in this passage is that Paul makes clear that this is no mere warm-fuzzy emotion. He says, "...the one who loves another has fulfilled the law." And again, a quick peek at the original Greek tells you that Paul is saying love fulfills all the laws. You know, all 613 laws of the Hebrew scriptures; the things that govern not thoughts, but actions; all of it is fulfilled with this one, mighty action: Love.

That, I believe, is the root of how the waters of baptism have turned us each into counter-cultural rebels. Because we have been swept into a way of living that places the hard-working love of the other at the heart of who we are. And if that doesn't put us out of sync with the dominant culture, I don't know what does.

Our culture certainly isn't one that often talks about forgiveness, or humility, or loving imperfectly and then trying again. No, right now, our dominant culture is one of division. And you don't need a preacher to tell you that. We all feel it. The culture expects the us and them thinking. It feeds this primal thing in us that is about self-preservation, and figuring out who "our" people are, and who might be a threat to our existence.

This is what we get a steady diet of from all the talking heads on TV. It feeds the thoughts that there is *my group* or *my people*...and there are *those people* (whoever they are). *Those* people are the problem. *Those* people are the threat. This is not who we are created to be! This belief that there even *is* such a thing as "us" and "them" is toxic for us. And it leads us into the pain we are experiencing.

Today, as I record this, our siblings in Kenosha are suffering. Another shooting. There are tears, and fists shaken at the sky. There is anger, and cries for justice. There is fear, and weariness. And buried underneath it all is the lie that there even *is* such a thing as "us" and "them,"...and...the systems we have built to sustain that lie.

The only remedy for a lie that I know of...is the truth. And in today's Gospel, Jesus invites us all into the deep truth we have already named: **love is an action, and it's always an invitation to try again.**

Jesus starts by talking about conflict within human relationships. “If another member of the church sins against you,” he says...and before Jesus was even done with that first sentence, his original listeners would have thought they knew where he was headed. The dominant culture back then was wrapped around honor and shame. People would debate each other in the public square, and so if someone had done something wrong, it was obvious to everyone what you should do...make the whole community aware of their error, of course! Because if their reputation was diminished, then yours was elevated. And everyone back then knew...this is just how things work.

But Jesus doesn't finish his sentence in the way they would have expected. “If another member of the church sins against you,” he says, “go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.” Protect the reputation of the one who has wronged you. If that doesn't work, bring two or three others, and try again. Do everything in your power to regain that one, because they are your sibling, your very own flesh and blood. That...was counter-cultural back then. And it still is today.

Jesus is creating a new way of being community together. Where even the one who has wronged you is worthy of a second and a third try. A new way of being community together, where “us” and “them” is exposed for the lie that it is, because there is only “us.” This is the new way of being community that you and I joined in the waters of our baptism.

This is who we have been created to be, siblings in Christ...counter-cultural rebels...who are so loved that we can't help but surprise the world with love...even for (or *especially* for) those who some would say aren't on “our” side.

So, fellow rebels, hear the invitation one more time. Owe no one anything, except the continuing debt to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. Love is an action...and it's always an invitation to try again.

I want to close today with a question that has transformed how I think about this invitation to try again. It is the simple question, “what does love look like in this situation?” When I am faced with someone with whom I disagree, the Spirit nudges me to ask, “what does love look like in this moment?” When the enormity of the challenges we face together feels so big I wonder if anything I do really matters, the Spirit nudges me to ask, “what does love look like in this moment? What's one thing I can do to be loving?”

May this question...be a gift for you as well...rebels that you are. What does love look like? And then even if it isn't perfect, and it never is...love is always an invitation to try again. Thanks be to God. Amen.