

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: 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.*

Max Lucado, author, spiritual leader, and preacher, visited Manhattan on September 21, 2001, ten days after life was dramatically altered by planes tearing into the Pentagon and The World Trade Center towers. While he was there, a friend asked a taxi driver how he had been affected by the tragedy. He said, "I keep getting lost. Typically, I could always look up at the towers and get my bearings. And now I can't get my bearings anymore."

That day there were courageous people who took risks, unselfish behavior, firefighters and first responders rushed into the towers while others were rushing out; policemen helped people while the building was crushing down on them; citizens donated blood and came from all over the US to help any way they could.

Now with the devastation of Hurricane Laura and the attack of COVID 19 on the citizens of the world, the response of people tells us that humanity is still humanity in that they have never lost their bearings by helping and loving. That is what Paul encourages the people of Rome to do—never lose your bearings. Turn your eyes upon Jesus and get your bearings to be Christ-like.

Paul's words in verse 9 should sound familiar to all Christians. Jesus taught us that we all should love our neighbors as ourselves. When Jesus was asked, “Who are our neighbors?” he told the parable of the Good Samaritan. which we find in Luke 10:25-37. In that story, a man was robbed, beaten, and left to die along the side of the road.

Some people came by—people you would expect to help him—but for personal reasons, they didn't help. Then a Samaritan came by and saw the man. Now the Samaritan was considered an enemy of the beaten man; however, he stopped and helped the man, caring for his wounds, getting him to a hotel, and paying the hotel bill.

Jesus taught his listeners through this story that all people are our neighbors; not just the person sitting next to us, not just people who are like us and people who believe the same things we believe, nor just the people we know. Everyone is our neighbor, even our enemies. Yes, even our enemies. Jesus was specific in his teaching when he said in Matthew 5:44, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

Paul was reminding or, perhaps, sharing for the first time this important teaching of Jesus with the believers in Rome, a group Paul found out about which was likely started by some Jews who were at the Pentecost event and not by him. Paul was excited for this group and wanted to share with them the message of salvation. Every day they were faced with living directly in the

face of the Roman authorities who lived contrary to many of the ways Jesus taught. People in the city worshiped other gods. They were challenged daily as they resided among these conflicting values. The people of that church may have struggled to understand and know how to love those in their society who made their life miserable, who made the practicing of their faith challenging, and those who were so messed-up with their personal priorities.

So, Paul spends some time talking about being good citizens in that community. Prior to verse eight, Paul spoke of giving the authorities what they are owed, which is also similar to Jesus' teaching on "rendering unto Caesar that which is Caesar's and unto God that which is God's," which we find in Matthew 22:21, meaning we should respect and honor the government's laws and pay taxes, so long as these things do not go against God's law. Obedience to God's law overrules conflicting principles.

As we consider again what is in God's law, we must note that love is at the top of the list, love of God, and as is specifically mentioned in today's text, love of neighbor. As we work at loving God above all things—principles and all people—we are drawn into a personal relationship that shapes who we are and how we treat others. Our relationship with God, is the foundation that supports our efforts to love others—even our enemies.

Let us consider then that the giving of love fulfills at least three purposes. First, it blesses the person who receives love. Many people are desperately in need of a kind word or some small demonstration that someone cares about them. Many of them are misunderstood and ignored. They may then be the recipients of words and actions from attitudes of ignorance and pride rather than words and actions flowing from a heart filled with the love of God, causing division among people and disillusionment about God and the church.

The simple gift of love makes a difference as illustrated in this story. A mentally impaired youngster seated himself on the floor in a drugstore and began to play with some bottles he had taken from the shelves. The druggist saw this and ordered him to stop and then scolded him with an even sharper tone. Just then the boy's sister came up, put her arms around him, and whispered something in his ear. Right away, he put the bottles back in place. "You see," his sister explained, "he doesn't understand when you talk to him like that. I just love it into him." People are blessed by the love of God when we love them. It can really make a positive difference in their lives.

Secondly, the Christian who shows love for his/her neighbor becomes a powerful witness for Christ. Loving even our enemies can open doors, conversations that encourage them to seek Christ.

There was an Armenian nurse who had been held captive along with her brother by the Turks. Her brother was slain by a Turkish soldier before her eyes. Somehow, she escaped and later became a nurse in a military hospital. One day she was stunned to find that the same man who had killed her brother had been captured and brought wounded to the hospital where she worked.

Something within her cried out "Vengeance." But a stronger voice called for her to love. She nursed the man back to health. Finally, the recuperating soldier asked her, "Why didn't you let me die?" Her answer was, "I am a follower of Him who said, 'Love your enemies, do good to them which hate you'" (Luk_6:27). Impressed with her answer, the young soldier replied, "I never heard such words before. Tell me more. I want this kind of religion." Loving others is a witness for Christ, inviting others to meet him and know him as the Living Savior of us all.

Thirdly, this discussion takes us back to Paul's words that love fulfills the law. Paul illustrates how love fulfills the law when he brings up four of the Ten Commandments: "You

shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet.” Loving others means these sins do not happen.

These commandments are what we might consider to be obvious ones that we wouldn't think of doing because we are Christians. But notice, Paul also mentions two other sins that Christians may more easily commit without giving it a second thought. Those sins he mentioned are quarreling and jealousy. Who among us has not given into these behaviors? Quarreling and jealousy are fueled by close-mindedness and selfishness, both of which are actually evidence that one has lost sight of and touch with God at that moment. Quarreling and jealousy destroy marriages and family relationships, friendships, a person's self-worth, the fulfillment of dreams and ideas; and we see this happen in churches as well as other organizations. The attitudes and behaviors that quarreling and jealousy produce can be just as damaging if not worse than the laws we consider to be obvious “thou shalt not do's”.

But let us remember that we have more than the commandments to illustrate to us what love is. We have God's love poured out on us daily. The love of God for us is more than mere words. God revealed his compassionate and enduring love for us when it took the form, the action of the ultimate sacrifice of his Son Jesus through whom we can receive salvation. It's because of Jesus that we know what love is and because of his sacrifice, we know it is not always easy to love.

Paul tells us it's time to wake-up. Because of Jesus, we have no excuse for not knowing how to love. We need to come out of the darkness and reject ignorance to the evidence and teachings of love through our Savior, Jesus Christ and turning from those things that lead to the sin of selfishness. Instead, Paul tells us to put on the light of the likeness of Christ.

In the *Discipleship Journal*, Carole Mayhall tells of a woman who went to a diet center to lose weight. The director took her to a full-length mirror. On it, he outlined a figure and told her, "This is what I want you to be like at the end of the program." Days of intense dieting and exercise followed, and every week the woman would stand in front of the mirror, discouraged because her bulging outline didn't fit the director's ideal. But she kept at it, and finally one day she conformed to the longed-for image.

Yes, it takes discipline and obedience to God's law, It takes submission to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It takes practice to take on the likeness of Christ. And when we mess up, as we all do, it means we don't give up. Instead we get back up, brush ourselves off, ask for God's forgiveness, and make loving God and others our number one priority.

May each one of us commit ourselves afresh, to the practice of this same love God has for us. Then, imperfect though we are, we can become what God would have us be: agents of divine love, lights of the world in our place and time.

In words from the Book of Common Prayer, let us pray now:

*“O Lord, you have taught us that without love,
whatever we do is worth nothing:*

Send your Holy Spirit

*and pour into our hearts your greatest gift, which is love,
the true bond of peace and of all virtue,*

without which whoever lives is accounted dead before you.

*Grant this for the sake of your only Son Jesus Christ,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and ever. Amen.”*