

14th Sunday after Pentecost September 6, 2020

Romans 13:8-14, Matthew 18:15-20

My Dad taught me that you always give your employer a good day's work and then a little bit more. If it takes five extra minutes to finish up that project, put in the work and don't worry about getting paid. This is part of what you owe your employer for the job you have and the pay you've been given.

This kind of thinking is part of what makes this passage from Paul to the Romans so shocking, "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law." First century Roman culture used the language of obligation extensively. You owed the emperor honor and allegiance, you owed your patron (the one more powerful than you who looked out for you) money, possessions, honor, and service. Enslaved people owed their lives and labor to slave owners. Wives and children owed submission to the head of the household. Failure to fulfill any of those obligations could bring ruin or even death.

The idea of obligation was central to how those in the Roman Empire thought about their relationships with others. It's a kind of transactional way of viewing relationship- what do I owe them, what do they owe me.

Then Paul comes along and upsets the apple cart by telling these faithful Roman Christians that the only thing they owe anyone...is love. Their only obligation in any of their relationships is to show love to the other person. What does that mean? Well- love does nothing wrong, nothing injurious or destructive to another. Love does not harm someone else.

Note, Paul does not say in addition to these other obligations you owe them love. Rather, Paul says this is the only thing you owe them. He chucks all those other obligations right out the window- thus reshaping how they live their lives entirely.

Use some of that sacred imagination from last week and imagine what it would be like to live in a world where our only obligation was to do nothing wrong, injurious, or destructive to another. Or, if we think of it in a positive sense, to do only those things that build up, care for, enable and empower another person. Now, part of what that implies is we would need to know those around us well enough to know what would cause them harm, what would hurt them. Conversely, what would help them.

Think of your family. You know them pretty well, don't you? You know the buttons you could push to really tick them off- right? But you avoid those things- even if you don't think they're such a big deal. Why, because you love them. And love means not hurting the object of your love. This, Paul says, is all that we owe one another.

With this in mind we approach Jesus' conversation with the disciples. This conversation happens just after Jesus shares the parable of the lost sheep- where the shepherd leaves the flock to go find the one lost sheep. It is also in the context of Jesus warning the disciples to go to extreme lengths to care for the "least of these". There is some dispute among theologians over what exactly Jesus is talking about in our passage (is this conflict resolution between two disciples with a beef, or is this about correcting someone who has strayed from the Christian path?) Either way, it certainly

shows the lengths that we are to go to, to stay in relationship with someone who has sinned.

Now the process is one that is probably familiar to most of us, it exists in our own constitution as the means for resolving conflict. It's also pretty good HR policy. If someone does something to hurt you, they wrong you or cause injury or if you see them sinning- first you go to them in private, one on one, and talk with them. If they don't repent, then you take one or two more people to bear witness to both the wrong and their response and try again. If that doesn't work, then you bring the matter to a larger audience. If they still won't listen, then you treat them as a Gentile or tax collector.

Now, most of us know that for Jews of that time- Gentiles and tax collectors were very low on the totem pole. To even associate with them could make you ritually unclean and unable to participate in the rituals of the faith. So, we tend to read this text in that light. "Ah! If they go all the way to the group and still don't listen...through the bum out!"

Except, might it not be relevant to look back and see how Jesus has treated Gentiles and tax collectors up to this point in the Gospel? He has eaten with them, forgiven them, called them to be his disciples. So, perhaps Jesus does not mean giving up on the one who does not repent but rather an acknowledgment that the relationship is changed, that they should still be within our care, but our approach is to proclaim the gospel to them in word and deed as if they have not heard it before.

Now, what Jesus lays out is a difficult, time consuming, draining process. I would say that for most of us it is easier to complain about someone and how they have behaved towards us behind their backs than to speak to that

person directly. It is easier to gossip about their sins rather than seek to call them back into right living. Some of us find this kind of potential for conflict invigorating, but most of us will avoid it. Especially the potential of doing that three times!

Now, if it is true that most of us aren't inclined to do this naturally, what is driving this process? Love. Only love would say that someone is worth expending this amount of effort for to save them from their own sin. Only love would strive in this way for restoration of relationship when there had been a rupture. Only love would come to them again, and again, and again and even then, not write them off.

I have seen parents' cash in retirement savings to try (again) to get treatment for a child with an addiction. I have seen people bail out friends (again) who have made bad decisions and are destitute. It would be so easy to write these people off. Just walk away, but love won't let them. Even when they fundamentally disagree with how they are living their lives. This is the principle Jesus lays out here in action. This is Paul's obligation of love at work. How that is lived out may change, but the movement towards the good of another, of restoration of broken relationships is always our goal.

The challenge to this love, this constant pursuit of relationship is that it means we need to be vulnerable. Open to being hurt. Those same parents and friends who reach out in love to support and care for those they love are opening themselves to being hurt... again. To having damage inflicted upon them and their lives.

But they do it anyway, because love does not count the cost for us, it counts the cost for the beloved. Love knows that we mess up, but it waits for reconciliation. It hopes for it, works for it, persists until it happens.

And we do this because this is what God in Jesus Christ has done for us. The story of scripture from Adam and Eve down to us is the story of God's pursuit of relationship with us. Of reconciliation with the beloved creation that keeps turning away, again, and again, and again. And still- God freely gives us the only thing Paul says we owe each other- love. Self-sacrificial love. Love that seeks the good of the beloved.

The question is, what kind of community will we be? Not just here at St. John but in Ely, our state, our country. Will we be a community where all we owe one another is love? Will we be a community that takes the hard route of getting to know each other, of being careful with each other so we do not cause injury or pain to someone else? This will require getting to know one another, listening to each other. It will require speaking freely to others about where they hurt us, it will require being willing to forgive those hurts, reconcile with those who hurt us, and try again.

Is this how we are living with each other now? At St. John? In Ely? In our state? In our nation? Can we name for ourselves, in our lives, places where we are not carrying out this obligation of love?

Now is the time for us to wake from our sleep, as Paul says. Martin Luther spoke of this as the spiritual sleep where we live in sin and are content. Luther believes that whenever Christ reminds us to "keep awake" he is not speaking to unbelievers or believers in mortal sin, but rather to "Christians who are living lukewarm lives and are snoring in their smugness." These

are the ones who appear godly, but deny the power of God. Who go about as if they have no need of repentance, and if no need of repentance, then no need of mercy, and if no need of mercy no need of salvation. And then what good is Jesus to them?

So, we must continually “wake up” and strive each day to walk in this way of love towards all people. To acknowledge where we fall short and try again, and again, and again to restore relationship with our neighbors.

When we do this- when there is this kind of relationship based in love, repentance, reconciliation and forgiveness, there is new life. Because there is always a new beginning. Because the story is never ended- that’s it, you’re done, goodbye. No- there is always hope, always a chance at forgiveness, mercy, love.

And as we live out this love for one another, Christ is indeed with us. Emmanuel- do you remember that name given to him so long ago. God is with us when we love one another.

As we travel the journey of our lives my friends- let us remember that Christ is with us, let us love one another as God in Christ has loved us, with a never ending love, and in doing so- there is the promise of new life.

Thanks be to God!