

September 4, 2005/Season after Pentecost/David L. Edwards

Our Only Debt

Romans 13:8-10(11-14) *Owe no one anything except to love one another....*

Love of one another ought to be undertaken as a protest against the course of this world, and it ought to continue without interruption. --Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*

...we members of the Church of the Covenant, do covenant with one another that each of us will...Endeavor in every relationship to be a channel of God's love and forgiveness.

--from "Our Covenant One with Another"

Preparing a sermon this week was more difficult than usual. I committed myself to work with this reading from Paul's Letter to the Romans. It is about making love the central vocation of our lives. Yet the devastation and suffering on the Gulf Coast cast a heavy cloud over everything. The greatest suffering, as always, belongs to the most vulnerable in our society—persons who are elderly, black, and poor. This natural disaster revealed the growing social and economic disaster in our nation. The week before the hurricane hit, an economic report told us what we have already known or suspected—the only growth in the economy has been to the benefit of the top 5% of the population, those who are already the wealthiest. The number of those living in poverty has grown. And those with jobs are working harder and earning less. The hurricane was apocalyptic; it lifted the lid off so that we see reality, the true condition of our society.

I struggled with Paul's words about love. What do they have to do with all of this. Is loving one another, loving neighbor as self anything more than a nice pious thought that is unconnected with the realities of life for so many of our brothers and sisters, or even our own lives and the hard things we face? I believe the love Paul talks about IS more than that, is something powerful, transforming, and at the core of what we humans are to be about. This week it just seemed hard to make the connection. But it would not let me go. Let me simply share some comments on this brief passage that might help us re-orient our lives in the love of God embodied and given to us in Christ as the truth and purpose of our own lives. By touching this love and life of loving, we might regain our orientation and be confirmed in a faith that is directly relevant to what we have experienced this past week.

"Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law." Paul is confident that if we make love

the central activity and aim of our lives, we are fulfilling everything God asks of us. If that is happening in each and all of us, then we will be on the right path as a human family. There is nothing more that we owe each other and the world except to love. This is expressed in the commitment that is made when one becomes a Covenant Member in our community—to “endeavor in every relationship to be a channel of God’s love and forgiveness.” Of all the spiritual disciplines, this one is perhaps the most central and most challenging. It calls us to give attention every day to our relationships and how we are or are not expressing the love of God.

What **is** this love? It is the very love with which God loves us, that comes to us in Christ, the love that called the world into being and that sustains the world. It is not sentimentalism. It is not even having positive feelings for others. This love has to do with **how we act** toward others. It is a continuation through us of the love that comes from God. God’s love is unconditional—there is no earning of it; it comes to us as gift from the One who created us. To love others in this way means loving them as they are, not as we want them to be. God’s love is steadfast—the most common description of God in scripture. Steadfast love does not give up on us, does not turn away. It does not throw in the towel when things get difficult or don’t turn out the way we want. If we are to love with that kind of love, then we do not give up on ourselves or other people. God’s love is compassionate and just—God responds to our suffering, enters into solidarity with us, and works for the wellbeing of all, not just some.

This love is the only thing we owe, the only requirement of our living, the only obligation we have. I think this is a tremendous statement about freedom. God loves us in a way that allows us freedom to respond and does not take away our freedom to respond. God’s love is for us regardless of whether we accept or reject it. This is how we are to love one another. To love each other in this way means that we free each other from the expectations and demands we tend to place on one another. Often our loving has strings attached, something we want to get out of a relationship, some way we want the other person to be or to change. So we are loving up to the point of what we want or expect from the other person. Then, if we are disappointed, we withdraw love. It is precisely at the point where our loving of others no longer “feels good” that we are on the threshold of loving the way Paul is talking about, with God’s own love. Then we can move beyond feelings into commitment, steadfastness, forgiveness, community, and the kind of love that is selfless, truly offered for the sake of the other person.

Love fulfills the law, says Paul. There were hundreds of commandments and laws in Hebrew Scriptures, including the Ten Commandments, of course. The shift Paul says we need to make is from approaching the life of faith as a matter of preoccupation with laws, a legalistic approach, to a single, unified life centered in positive loving of

others. It is a shift from life as “You shall not” to “You shall.” We are liberated from self-centered preoccupation with our own goodness or morality for the selfless and free life of loving. What a difference this makes! Instead of getting up in the morning and thinking, “What do I have to do today so that I don’t goof up?”, we can say, “How can I love today? What ways do I have at my disposal to show love and forgiveness in my relationships?” Jesus didn’t come giving us another list of rules and laws. He came to call us into a LIFE, a way of living through which God’s own love flows into the lives of others and the world.

Love your neighbor as yourself. This is not new. It was central to Jesus’ teachings. But, who is my neighbor and what does it mean to love my neighbor as myself? A lawyer came up to Jesus one day with that very question [Luke 10]. First, he asked Jesus how he could get eternal life, life that is full, life the way God meant it to be. You know the commandments, says Jesus. Oh yes, says the lawyer: Love God with your whole being and love your neighbor as yourself. Right you are, says Jesus. Just do that and you’ll have the kind of life you are looking for. But the man hesitated. Who IS my neighbor? He wanted to know some limits, who he was and wasn’t required to love. So Jesus told the famous parable of the good Samaritan.

A fellow is traveling a dangerous road between Jericho and Jerusalem. He is jumped by robbers, beaten, and left for dead. Along come two religious folks, at least according to the laws of Judaism. They see the victim and go out of their way to avoid him. Then along comes this Samaritan. Samaritans were hated by the Jews. They were considered irreligious, immoral, and even atheistic. But it is the Samaritan who stops to help. He doesn’t check to see if this fellow is a Jew or a fellow countryman. All he sees is a fellow human being in need, and he acts quickly to help.

So Jesus asks the lawyer, Who **was** neighbor to the man in the ditch? Notice how Jesus changed the question. Not “Who is my neighbor?” but “Who **WAS** neighbor?” Neighbor is a quality in ourselves, not in the other person. It has to do with our capacity to respond to whoever is in need, regardless of who they are, where they come from, or how they act. Being neighbor, loving others has nothing to do something about the other person. It has everything to do with the kind of people we are and how we respond to others.

Loving others as ourselves means seeing ourselves in the other person. It means recognizing our common humanity and our belonging to each other because we are all made and loved by God. Love as popularly understood these days works until differences are recognized and encountered. Then the love is withdrawn and hostility takes over. But the love Paul is talking about, the love Jesus embodied and taught, is a love that presses on through those conflicts. It looks more deeply into the other person until one sees another who is like oneself. It is easy, for instance, to

stir up anti-terrorist fervor and respond to violence with violence as we are doing. It is harder to see that the terrorist is usually a young person in poverty, who is uneducated, fearful, and angry. This person is easily recruited into zealous and destructive actions. The spiritually sound and more challenging way is to see deeply into the other person until we recognize one with whom we share a common humanity, who is fearful and hurting, and whose anger and fear we have something to do with.

Last year when the Covenant Members were revisiting the spiritual disciplines in “Our Covenant One with Another,” we spent an evening talking about this discipline of showing love and forgiveness in every relationship. Vince Sawyer made a very excellent and timely comment that this does not just mean human relationships but also our relationship with the creation itself. We can see ourselves also in the creation, for our lives are intertwined with the world around us. We are part of it; it is part of us. We are not separate from creation. If we look more deeply into the world in which we live and of which we are a part, we will see how to love the creation also as our neighbor, as ourselves.

Loving neighbor as self also means that **we are to love ourselves**. If we do not have a basic sense of our own worth and goodness in God’s eyes, then that is what we need to work on. If we do not have this love for ourselves, we can’t really give it to others. If we do not practice God’s love in and toward our own lives, then we will end up projecting our dissatisfaction, anger, and neediness onto others. In that case, our attempts to love others become in reality only ways of getting what we want and need. Love of others and love of ourselves are bound together in fullness of life that comes from God’s love for all of us.

This kind of love and loving is radical stuff! I was getting nowhere this week in my struggle to make some connection between Paul’s words and the suffering and injustice revealed in the wake of hurricane Katrina. Then I read these words in Karl Barth’s famous commentary on The Epistle to the Romans: *Love of one another ought to be undertaken as a protest against the course of this world, and it ought to continue without interruption.* Those words made it clear that the love we are to have and live is anything but fuzzy and sentimental. Christ fills us with and calls us a love that is a protest and a transforming power in a world, a nation, a city where people continue to suffer and to experience gross injustice. It is a love that sees the neighbor everywhere, in everyone who suffers, and then acts in some way to relieve suffering. It is a love that is steadfast and does not give up when everything seems to be against it.

This week the words of the refrain to a song I wrote some years ago kept coming into my mind. I wrote the song one night when I was feeling overwhelmed by life and what I felt to be my inadequacies in the face of so many needs. I just wondered if even this love we talk so much about in the church makes any real difference. The refrain goes this way:

*What have I to give to this sad and broken world?
What have I to give that could change a single thing?
I feel so small. I have nothing at all
but this love burning fiercely in my soul.*

That's the love Paul is talking about. It comes from God to us. It can burn in our souls and transform our lives into the channels of God's love they are meant to be. This love can change us and our world.